

SONO GRAM

of a potentiality

SONOGRAM OF A POTENTIALITY

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Quello che gli pende lo difende.

What hangs on it/him, defends it/him.

—Italian Proverb

*When I was born, my mother still didn't
know what gender her child was.*

*A nurse came into the room she was lying
in, half asleep after a long labor, and said
to her:*

*"Madam, you have suffered a disgrace. It's
a girl."*

That's how she was told of my birth.

—F., born in Naples, 1975

I would have liked *not to have to write this text.*
I would have liked to erase myself behind a prud-
ish flood of words, to drape my carnal body in the
sacrosanct neutrality of discourse, to ridicule my
desires or arrange them according to an analytical
table of pathologies that would have absolved me
only to better subjugate me. But I didn't, since
I no longer believe what's been said about me; I
needed a text written in many voices, a shared

kind of writing that would bring to life a sexualization with no prudishness, one that would tell it like it is, denature it, open it up like a sealed box, bringing it out of the cloister of the “private” and “intimate” to subject it to the intensity of politics.

I wanted a text that wouldn’t cry, that wouldn’t vomit sentences, that wouldn’t give premature answers just to make itself look unquestionable. And that’s why the following is not a text written by women for women, because I am not one and I am not just one, but I am a many that says “I.” An “I” against the fiction of the little “me” that acts as if it were universal and mistakes its own cowardice for the right to erase, in the name of others, everything that contradicts it.

The monologue of patriarchy has been interrupted many times. Many blows have been struck against the classical subject—closed, neutral, objective, cosmic. Its image has crumbled under the weight of the carnage of total wars that took all the ancient aura away from heroism; its solo speech has been drowned out by the brouhaha of the commodity Esperanto. New, improbable family relationships formed then: the old fool who’s been dispossessed of his world and the plebeian excluded from everything are now supposed to find

themselves on the same side of the barricades, now that there aren't any more barricades left at all.

So, to ask ourselves what we are, how we got there, who our brothers and sisters are, and who our enemies are, is no longer just a pastime for intellectuals on an introspection trip, but an immediate necessity. "Now that everything is destroyed, I'm left with one thing: myself," said Medea: starting from oneself is not a question of "penchants"; it is the ungrateful course of those who have been dispossessed of everything. Feminism undertook a battle that no longer exists, not because it won or lost, but because its battlefield was a constructible terrain and domination has now built its neighborhoods there.

A sonogram is an abusive operation. Beneath its pretext of therapeutic intent, it violates a secret space removed from visibility. By means of technology it gives itself the right to predict a future loaded with consequences. But its prophecy is fallible like all divination, and the possibilities it announces often become implicit impossibilities at the very moment it tears them away from the "not yet" and throws them into the irreparability of the present.

This text is a sonogram to the extent that it gives itself the right to obscenity, but not as an insult to some

presumed “public modesty”—in the context of commodity pornocracy, that would be pitifully ingenuous. Obscene, in the etymological sense, is what should not appear in the open, what must remain hidden because the relationship it has with official visibility is a relationship of negation and exorcism, complicity and repulsion. What can be said and what can be done depends on the relationship such saying and doing have with the ethical assumptions that comprise us: the possible is the margin where our mental balance can oscillate without failing us, where desubjectivation can be exercised without turning into delirium.

This text is intended as a non-therapeutic sonogram: the potential it examines knows no parameters of conformity, no completion in a pre-set act. There is a kind of discourse about love and insurrection that make all love and insurrection impossible. There’s also a kind of discourse about women’s freedom that simultaneously disqualifies both the term “woman” and the term “freedom.” What allows practices of freedom to surface is not whatever is not recuperable by domination, but what dearticulates the mechanisms producing our own emotional and psychosomatic disorder. The aim is not to abolish the malaise that pushes us to revolt so as to better adapt us to an obviously toxic system for managing bodies, nor is it to learn how to better struggle within the hindrances of the present

contingency in the name of some “strategy” that would lead us to victory. Because victory does not mean readapting the world through struggle, but adapting the world to struggle itself. That’s why all logic of differentiation serves a time with no present: the only really urgent thing for us now is to render the disturbance offensive, to become its accomplices, because “better death than the health which we are given” (G. Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, 1969).

One indeed must be obscene, because everything visible within biopolitical democracies is already colonized with a melancholic kind of obscenity that safely packages what should be scandalous.

What’s possible among men and women has unquestionably to do with the obscenity of our times, but it happens that the space of this connivance is neither immutable nor indecent, merely the result of a particular culture that is growing old and not doing it gracefully, forgetting patriarchy but remaining misogynist.

And since the framework of assumptions we move within are not logical but ethical, transmitted within a historically determined, rather than philosophically grounded order, we gaze disquietly at the excessive care with which men and women work on the upkeep

of their desires, within the production machine and against it, but also against themselves. Certainly they subjectivize themselves in order to be sexually desirable; they are sexualized because they have a generic relational existence, but that does not happen symmetrically: men have had access to a symbolic order, a transcendence very much their own, which prolonged the banality of their desire in the elegant appendices of power, whether legitimate or transgressive.

Women have remained bogged down in an unsayable corporeality, torn apart between the image of submission that the old society has projected onto them and the new obligation of being post-human cogs in the capitalist desire machine.

Alas my brothers,/ Helen did not walk/upon the ramparts,/she whom you cursed/was but the phantom and the shadow thrown/of a reflection,”

“Alas my brothers,” wrote H.D., “Helen did not walk / upon the ramparts, / she whom you cursed / was but the phantom and the shadow thrown / of a reflection” (Helen in Egypt, 1961) and all women walk with her, like the poor, beautiful Helene, the phantom that men’s desire for power, born among men and bearing no relation to her pleasure, has attached to her fate. And it is a desire with no leeway, because all feminine transgression ends up twisting mouths into a bitter

grimace. When a Don Juan sparks the complicity of the most faithful of wives, free women are still a public threat.

Platonism was born as a secondary manifestation of orphism. Dialectics, thus, and to a certain extent Marxism and materialism as well, are linked in part to the unhappy love story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The legend tells that the poet Orpheus, who was so fluent with his logos that even the trees and animals felt moved, lost his lover Eurydice in the flower of her youth, and the gods, touched by his inconsolable pain, allowed him to go down into the kingdom of the dead to bring her back to earth. The only condition was that he had to accompany her without ever looking at her in the pallid light of the land of the dead and had to wait to be among the living again to see her face.

Whether out of passion or skepticism, despair or apprehension, Orpheus turned to look. Whether it was because he couldn't share the secret of life and death (women's prerogative), or simply because he was incapable of believing that something more than a woman's body might be following him, or just out of his desire to gaze into the eyes of his lover's ghost, Orpheus was deprived of his loved one, and, drunk on his pain, was devoured by the Maenads.

A question inevitably arises here: why was the sublime poet unable to find the words to speak to his loved one but rather felt only the urge to look at her? Was he not perhaps hesitant to take back with him a woman who he'd lost control over for a time, who he'd lost sight of, thinking she was dead when she could still follow him and come back with him?

What about Eurydice?

When Hermes, who came to accompany her back to life shouted, "he has returned," Eurydice asked, "who?" (R.M. Rilke, Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes, 1904).

Now that the social contract has been definitively rescinded, women are welcome everywhere, and there are some that are quite excited about it. Until recently they had remained quietly at the gates, but now they oppress people in the Parliaments, falsify reality in the press, and are exploited in the same professions as men; they are now just as null as they are, and even a little bit more because of the enthusiasm that they put into zealously carrying out the most terrible of tasks.

ONE asks ONESELF why they hadn't thought to make use of them before now.

It is surprising; they love it all: commodities and maternity, work and marriage, millennia of docility and oppression stream along in hundreds of women's little floods of reformist or reactionary happiness.

And anyway, modern women don't really love the Blooms, who they find rather too passive and too in love with their oppressors. From time to time they complain that they're not even good enough for us to subjugate to ourselves anymore.

IN THE BELLY OF THE WAR MACHINE

“The difference about being a woman is that woman found her free existence by leveraging herself not on the given contradictions, present within the social body, but on the contradictions that each individual woman had inside her, and which had no social form to them before receiving one from feminine politics. We ourselves, so to speak, invented the social contradictions that make our freedom necessary.”

—Milan Women’s Bookstore
Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory
of Social-Symbolic Practice*, 1987

Penelope’s labor. Is it not finished? It is never finished. Women make things, and time erases all the vestiges of them. On the pretext that women don’t exist; that it means nothing. There is no “woman problem” separate from the problems of the body, the problems involved in managing these bodies that don’t belong to us. And anyway, to whom does this body belong, this pretty little body that everyone wants to fuck? To whom does this body belong, which is not really so pretty at all, and that everyone sizes up, like people used to judge cows at the

cattle auction? To whom does this body belong, this body that grows old, gets fat, gets deformed, and makes me work to maintain it and keep it in conformity with the parameters of what's desirable? Desirable *for whom*? And so the abyss grows deeper, between those who work on their added value and those who go on strike. But the consequences are everyday and definitive; I myself am the object either of my strike action or my hard work. Between my cellulite and my fatigue, my job and my pretty face, my conversation and my patience. No rest, comrades; no rest, my dear boss.

It is called affect-value, and it is the added value of heterosexual women, the most prized of commodities, the one that makes all the others sell, and which, furthermore, makes edibles (she does the cooking), livables (she makes babies), and fuckables (she maintains her body). A slight drop of transgression, perhaps? But of course, my dear; it is just a little overtime work so as not to be *ordinary*. And if in your group of friends it has been decreed that this is all bullshit, that you're all beyond all that, and even beyond the need to write a text like this, it must be pointed out—quick!—how shameful it is to feel needs that others consider illegitimate. The shame of getting tired of being pretty and nice, when apparently you have not even been asked... “What's her problem? Is she on the rag? What, maybe she does not get laid very well?” It is *not even*

asked because it is *implied*; because people think that woman corresponds, through and through, to her daily labor of autopoiesis. Still no rest! But I've got a soul too! Yes, a working girl's soul! And what's more, it is even profitable... You're getting off easy, my dear, and the more we indulge you the more you're dependent; and the more anti-conformist your life is, the more tiring it is to hold it all together.

"What's she talking about? I don't get it; do you?"

The less duped we are, the more difficult it is. Mistrusting other women, each of them comfortably—or painfully—confined to her decorated little corner of separation. "Feminist self-consciousness; see where it got us?" Yes, I see: the meta-consciousness of unconsciousness. We know that the woman problem is a problem; but we also know that it is a problem to express it, and so, you see, by repressing the problems or posing them wrongly, well now, we've gotten all tired out, and that's our real problem now.

I see.

I understand.

The more I understand, the unhappier I am; I want to forget, I want to tell myself that I can "realize" myself through work, through the couple form,

in maternity, in entertainment, in decoration, in literature, in S/M.

The intellectual and transgressive woman, the sadistic *domina* who knows what she's doing; that's not so bad, is it? If you've got the means and the character to do it, that is.

Face and assume your solitude; make something exceptional out of it. Become a porn star, the hippest spokesperson for globalization. You'll be alone still, but less depressed; frustrated, but socially recognized.

"Be content, is that it? But contentedness is damaging!"

"Quit complaining!"

"Shut it!"

How's that work? The war machine fights and desires, desires and fights. It can't fight against its own desire; that jams it up. It can't examine it too much; that grinds it to a halt. So how do you do it then? I want to fight; to fight with my brothers and my sisters.

But I desire strength to keep it up, to go on fighting, to no longer doubt that my place is there, that my pleasure is there. And yet that's not my place, not my desire. Because the war machine is male, and

besides, that's what pleases me about it. But alas, warriors are homosexual, and moreover they scorn their desires.

How's that work? The anthropologists explain that there are various cultures within the "men's house." "Considerable sexual activity does take place in the men's house, all of it, needless to say, homosexual. But the taboo against homosexual behavior (at least among equals) is almost universally of far stronger force than the impulse and tends to effect a rechannelling of the libido into violence... Indeed, the warrior caste of mind, with its ultravirility, is more incipiently homosexual in its exclusively male orientation than it is overtly homosexual. (The Nazi experience is an extreme case in point here.) And the heterosexual role-playing indulged in, and still more persuasively, the contempt in which the younger, softer, or more 'feminine' members are held, is proof that the actual ethos is misogynist, or perversely rather than positively heterosexual" (K. Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 1968) ... That reminds me of something. It reminds me of the man in me; and that presents a problem to me. I don't feel myself to be in solidarity with women that do not wish to struggle, that live outside of the war machine. I also suddenly realize, myself as well, that "women" do not exist, and that if they did exist I wouldn't want

to be around them. Between the guard dogs and the makeup experts, between the homemakers and career women, there are too many different kinds of suffering, and too many wrong answers. Too many social differences and opposing interests. No possibilities shine from that horizon.

And so I have a problem. I don't want to leave my war machine. Outside of the war machine, I'd only have a right to a domestic existence. *They'll want to tame me, domesticate me.* Women used to be a kind of furniture; now they've become a kind of pet animal.

I want to struggle.

Help me to struggle.

Have I always loved men as if I were of the same gender? Am I really a boy, a naughty boy with no balls? No! I'm not castrated and I don't want a penis. At all. I swear! And plus I love girls, women in general. I excuse them when they're stupid, I admire them when they do good. Woman are great; they bring joy to the open-air shopping mall of our lives—they add a kind of holiday charm! Do I love them like a man, with the same hypocrisy, and even the cowardly hope that they won't become my rivals in seduction? Is it rhetoric? Or is it chivalry?

When ONE loves women, is ONE not perhaps just playing out again the contemptible farce of courtly love, romantic love, where woman is an angel, never shits, never gets her period, has no body?

What do they vomit up, the anorexics, the bulimics, the women with eating disorders? They vomit up *their bodies*. Perhaps *they* haven't understood anything at all about that, and just want to look like Kate Moss. But *their bodies* understand; the body understands everything and explains it. They have their symposium of gastric juices that corrode the teeth, bones that show through the skin, stretch marks that disfigure the stomach. The Spectacle is getting more and more clinical. As usual, the medical womb spits in our faces that our bodies do not belong to us (read: you can't rent it out or sell it as you please anymore), that our bodies are the bodies of the sick, the bodies of hysterical lunatics that no one would want.

Women's bodies say things that no mouth dares repeat. Women's bodies hear things that ears refuse to hear. What people say to women counts for nothing.

What counts is *what people do to them, and what they do to themselves*.

I want to struggle alongside women, and alongside men. I want us not to leave the war machine, and to grow together, I want us to make it irresistibly desirable. I want us to make it truly *mixed* [mixte]. And perverse. And polymorphous. And on the offensive. I want us never to get bored of it anymore. I want us to forget women, to forget men, because those are just two names for one and the same constraint, tied to accumulation and military offensives.

Outside of capitalism and the piling up of goods, outside of the war waged for the pillage and extension of power, we have nothing to do with “men” and “women” and their pathogenic families.

We don't give a fuck about being compatible with their now; we are compatible with our future.

WHAT'S THE DEAL HERE, NOW?

It appears at times that historical misrepresentation can never appear too egregious when its subject is woman.

—K. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 1970

We too, we also are leaving behind the whorehouse of historicism and all that fucking “once upon a time” shit, and we have no regrets; but it is with a certain skepticism with regard to the recitals of historical materialism, which would remain “master of its forces: virile enough to shatter the continuum of history” (W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 1940).

The continuum of history is not a given; it is the chatter of the dominant ones over the silence of the dispossessed, the systematic sequence of virile narratives; whether materialist or historicist, whether good spouses or libertines, it matters little. Above all today, when History (the widow of the classical subject: the valiant male, the hero or the scholar,

capable of making it and passing it on) stammers and the moral of the story does not enlighten anyone anymore. History is not finished; experiences seek out and find, at this precise moment in the recesses of time, the words to declare themselves and pass themselves on, but that's become an effort, a practice of resistance.

Though "Culture" can no longer serve as a crutch for the powerful to beatify their crimes, there are few women complaining about that. Because even if they never really were a minority, their wisdom and their histories have only embroidered the edges of the great Western narrative. There's a complicated relationship between women and the heroic epic...

The commonplace goes that women and anecdotes have almost an innate relatedness. In pre-industrial societies, loves, pains, sicknesses, deaths, and births passed through the human tissue of the villages by way of words spoken by one woman into another's ear; in the same way the places of domestic labor, where everyday knowledge-powers circulated and forms-of-life reproduced themselves, were the places of story-telling among women and to children.

And today still. Feminine friendships remain narrative friendships, where the other is necessary to

see yourself again, to recompose yourself, to recognize yourself. But the need for a narrative of the self, in order to not succumb to identity-idleness and to resignation in the face of its failings, to the madness of not seeing yourself in your own acts anymore, now fills the psychoanalysts' pockets. To where there's nothing left to say: experience and narrative having divorced one another, all we're left with is *information*, neutral, aseptic, appalling—and our passivity as receivers.

I won't be telling just one single story here; I'll be telling a few, about a multiple and heterogeneous experience that took place primarily in Italy, but not exclusively, between the sixties and seventies. The Milan Women's Bookstore is part of it, as are many voices, both women's and men's, from different perspectives.

The voices that I'm gathering here in an arbitrary way, and under the name *ecstatic feminism*, have in common a line of flight, a promise, a tone, sometimes a revolt, a need for strength. In this constellation what shines is the inviolability of women and the desire to change the relationship between immanence and transcendence, as well as the refusal of the abstraction of law, the unreal institutional representation of bodies, and the demand for a

plane of political consistency shared among men and women, the crossgender/mixed hypothesis.

What I'm tracing out here is an *anarcheology*, which excavates shattered fragments out of the disorder, and examines their possibilities rather than trying to figure out who they belonged to. It is justified to be hesitant before making grand syntheses or taking clearly defined perspectives on this story, because of the fact that it is not over, has in part remained silent, and in part has been told by falsifiers.

PRIMACY OF PRACTICE: START FROM YOURSELF

A POLITICS THAT DOESN'T ALWAYS HAVE THE NAME POLITICS

And though it is true that the juridical has been able to represent, doubtless nonexhaustively, a power that is essentially centered around withdrawal and death, that is still absolutely compatible with power's new procedures, which operate not by punishment but by control, and which operate on levels and in forms that go beyond the State and its machinery. After centuries, we have now entered into a kind of society where the juridical can less and less cipher power or serve it as a system of representation. Our trajectory distances us more and more from the rule of law, which had already started to recede into the past at the time of the French Revolution, when an age of constitutions and codes seemed to hold promise of it for the near future.

It is this juridical representation that is at work in the contemporary analyses of power's relationship to sex. The issue is not whether desire is

foreign to power, if it is anterior to the law, as is often imagined, or whether it is not the law itself that constitutes it. That's not the point. Whether the former or the latter is true about desire, either way we continue to conceive of it relative to a power that is always juridical and discursive—a power that finds its central focus in the pronouncement of the law. We remain attached to a certain image of power/law... And that's the image we have to liberate ourselves from, the theoretical privilege of law and sovereignty, if we want to make an analysis of power in the concrete and historical play of its procedures. An analysis of power must be constructed no longer having law as its model and code. ... We have to think about sex without law, and power without kings.

—M. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 1976

In 1966, ten years before the appearance of the first volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, a group of women in Italy had already attacked the repression it hypothesized. *Demau*, an abbreviation for “demystification of patriarchal authoritarianism,” was not so much an attack on masculine oppression, but rather simply indicated that there was a problem between women and society, and that it wasn't the women that posed

that problem to society (which is called the “female question”) but rather society that posed a problem to these women. From their perspective, the politics of integration was to their situation what chamoile is to a serious illness, because female separation, even in the marginality it entails, once it is reappropriated, becomes a starting point for attack, and no longer a source of weakness. This approach put forth the feminine difference, to counter the myth of equality built according to the masculine yardstick. But at the same time what they were making was a symbolic revolution that would give women the tools to build another cartography of the world which would see them as subjects, a new transcendence which would allow female bodies to express themselves and think without sublimating themselves. “Man,” wrote Carla Lonzi, “has sought out the meaning of life beyond and against life itself; for woman, life and the meaning of life overlap each other constantly.” This was an attack directed against culture, one that laid the foundations for another kind of practice, an arithmetic of possibilities: to accuse philosophy of having spiritualized the hierarchy of fates by assigning man to transcendence and woman to immanence was to demand for oneself a right to make history, to conceive of birth, death, and war in a different

manner, to put in one's own two cents about what's viable and desirable.

“What human culture and women's liberation lacks,” we read in *Sexual Difference*, “is the act of female transcendence, the greater existence that we can attain by symbolically surpassing the limits of individual experience and of the naturalness of living.” But history went in a different direction. In the seventies in Italy, female consciousness was awakened as a result of the oppression women were undergoing there; the “feminine condition” was not reflected in the articulated social and political reality that it should have borne within it, rather it showed women who wanted freedom and potency a demeaning and deformed image that it was their moral duty to identify with, and which extinguished all enthusiasm. After 1970, and in the wake of the American experience, self-consciousness groups began to form in Italy. The silence was broken, but satisfaction was still far off: hearing the stories of women who were wrongfully treated as inferior in the family, at work, or in political groups, ended up producing a kind of echo chamber which rendered this contingent reality impassable. “This does certainly make us conscious,” said one woman, on the subject of self consciousness, “but it doesn't

give us tools, it doesn't make us develop any kind of contractual power within the transformation of the social; it just gives us consciousness and rage" (*ibid.*). And yet, in these words exchanged between women who had up until then remained mute, something had taken shape which would remain part of the feminist tradition: a certain intimate and familiar relationship with the sphere of the perceptible, a coming and going between concreteness and abstraction that cracked the smooth surface of the discourses that legitimate power.

Little by little, groups of women emerged from their innocence, which was the prison that society had confined them in and that separatism had had such a hard time getting them out of. We had to get free of the image of the "deathly mother" (*L'erba voglio*, #15) which nourishes but devours, simultaneously the image of devotion to others and of heteronomy, of she who renounces violence but loves it in men, by proxy and against herself.

On the subject of relations within groups of women, we read in 1976: "by excluding aggressiveness, everything's kept pure on the surface even if inside of us, among us, there's something threatening growing on a deep level; could what's made to stay outside perhaps be something that has forever been repressed and forbidden among women? Women

are tender, everyone says so; should we listen to what everyone says, or should we listen to what's happening among us that's new and extravagant?" (*Sexual Difference*).

Against the deathly mother arose the idea of the "autonomous mother": "To put it more simply, there is a feminine fear of exposing her own desire, of exposing herself with her desire, which pushes women to think that others are hindering her desire; and that's how she cultivates and manifests it, as something refused to her by external authority. In this negative form, feminine desire can feel authorized to express itself. We're thinking for example of the feminine politics of parity, upheld by women who never make themselves strong through their own free will but only and exclusively through what men keep for themselves alone and deny to women" (*Sexual Difference*).

However, the specter of a terrifying childhood, impossible to dismiss, continued haunting relations among women. "I felt an insane envy," says Lea, involved in the experiences of women's groups, "toward my friends who had come back from Portugal [there was an attempt at social revolution being made in Portugal at the time, in 1975], who had seen "the world," who had kept a familiarity with the world. I felt myself to be foreign to their

experience, but not at all indifferent. A consciousness of our reality/of the diversity of women cannot become an indifference to the world without plunging us once again into non-existence... Our political practice cannot make the mistake of reinforcing our marginality... How can we get out of this impasse? Will the women's movement have the strength and originality to discover the *history of the body* without letting itself be tempted by childishness (reinforcement of dependency, omnipotence, indifference to the world, etc.)?" (*Sottosopra*, #3, 1976).

After 1975, numerous women's bookstores were opened all over Italy, based on the example of the Parisian women's bookstore; women's documentation centers and libraries also came into being. The more the alternative took form, the more moderation grew, and the "satisfaction of surviving" became more predominant.

The wealth of the Italian movement, which had been the fact that it had focused on practices of subjectivation free from sordid realism, rather than on psychoanalysis and the therapeutic function of aggregation, had now turned against it. The history of the Col di Lana House, which opened in spring of 1976, gave a remarkable image of defeat: "when the House was all fixed up," as the protagonists recount, "women came in great numbers. During the

big meetings on Wednesday evenings, the main hall would fill. But it became clear quite soon that this bigger and more open place didn't even work for the broader political confrontation. Its dimensions only added to the phenomenon of the majority remaining passive and some few doing all the talking. Every time the room would fill up with 150 to 200 women, they'd start talking about the rain or the nice weather we'd been having, all in the most polite way, like it was a women's studies class waiting for the teacher to show up. This kind of half-waiting would stop when one person or another—though it was always the same people—would ask that we start in on the political work we had gathered there to do. The work would progress with the one or the other of them making their contributions, always the same ones talking, somewhere around ten of them, and the others just listened. There was no way of changing this ritual. If one of the ten didn't start the work, the others would go on chattering with the same vivacity. Once the debate had begun, if none of the ten spoke up, there would be total silence in the room. The themes of discussion were also incapable of shaking up the situation. In the end, as you can easily imagine, no subject really merited discussion besides the situation itself that had come about there, and the attempt to decipher

it. But even discussing that subject had no transformative effect. It was posed and discussed by the same ten that spoke all the time, in the face of the invariably mute presence of all the others. It was a total failure” (*Sexual Difference*).

The explosion of this huge, silent group of women which brought simply their massive and enigmatic presence to bear against the political will of the ten speakers, gave rise to twelve working commissions where that silence was to be broken. The women explained that they feared political conflictuality, that they perceived it as threatening to solidarity among women and the coherence of the collective, i.e., to their new subjective equilibrium. These women were subjectivized, in effect, but in a paralyzing manner. Their constructive practice, comprised of discourse and the transmission of a different kind of wisdom, because it never dared directly clash with what contradicted it, ended up speechless and uncurious. What these women feared the loss of if they were to expose themselves they had already lost long before: the protective unity that they wanted to preserve at all costs was already dead of their fear of modifying it; they had nothing left to say to themselves, they had started once again to survive in the margin, a situation that their whole meeting was supposed to have been intended to get them

out of. “The collective, if we’ve understood correctly, was thus not a place of a possible autonomous existence, but merely the empty symbol women have of that existence” (*ibid.*).

The fear of returning to dependence on men rendered relations between women rather undemanding, and leveled them from below: all divergence became a danger. A politics that only infects one gender is not infectious at all. Later practice at the Milan women’s bookstore went in a direction that thwarted this stasis through an active assumption of the disparities between women. The practice of confiding in a “symbolic mother” became the center of their activity and relations. The “greater woman than I,” who was supposed to comprise the most faithful, impassable mediator vis-à-vis the world, absorbed the power differential by embodying it. And such authority was considered legitimate because it got women out of a false, neurosis-generating and immobilizing sisterhood. The ecstatic phase of differentialist feminism had closed in on itself around the authoritarian mother.

A refusal of the repressive hypothesis here does not come out to its logical conclusion: the abandonment of separatism, and a cross-gender/mixed hypothesis. So, if the perspective we’re aiming at is such a mixed hypothesis, why keep the name

feminism, and not swallow it up in gender theory or queer theory?

Well, for a lot of reasons. The first is that women's movements have never been minority movements; women, as is well known, are numerically a majority on the planet; the second is that women, because of their long absence from the scene of knowledge and art, have been incompletely civilized, with no transcendence of their own, and for that reason they still bear within them a coming political potential: they have been integrated into management and into capitalism, but not so much into its political forms.

The third reason is that the body of woman, along with the bodies of children, even more than those of homosexuals or transsexuals, is the biopolitical body par excellence: the object where citizenship's calibration-operations and publicity are most invested; the biggest prop for the scripting of commodity desire.

The fourth reason is that women have deconstructed themselves long ago as women, but that that is not sufficient to fulfill the promise of a political practice of freedom that will unite the means and the ends: "As long woman demands reparations for wrongs against her, whatever she might get

out of it she'll never know freedom... Freedom is the only means of attaining freedom" (*Sexual Difference*).

“WE’VE BEEN
WATCHING FOR 4000
YEARS. FINE; NOW
WE’VE SEEN!”

MANIFESTO DI RIVOLTA
FEMMINILE, 1970

If it is true, as has been written, that the invention of the milk pasteurization process did more for women’s freedom than all the struggles of the ‘suffragettes,’ then we have to take action so as to make that not true anymore. And the same thing has to be said about medicine, with its reduction of infant mortality or its invention of birth control products, or about the invention of machines that have made human labor more productive, or progress in social life that have made men no longer see women as creatures of an inferior nature. Whence this freedom, given to me in a bottle of pasteurized milk? What roots has this flower, offered me as a sign of superior civilization? Who am I, myself, if my freedom depends on this bottle, on this flower placed in my hand? This is not so much a question of the precariousness of gift, even if it is a circumstance whose origins should not be neglected. We have to put

ourselves at the origins of our own freedom, in order to take full and sure possession of it; this does not mean guaranteed enjoyment, but it does mean the certainty of knowing how to reproduce that freedom even in the least favorable of conditions.

—Sexual Difference

What is a modest witness? According to Donna Haraway, it is someone whose invisibility to herself has risen to the dignity of an epistemological instrument.

Western universalism has lived within the myth of the truth-producing neutral being, thus giving itself the weapons for an unnamable oppression, creating a force relations for which the vocabulary of existing knowledge lacked words. The erasure of the subject and the upsurge of Bloom are the seismic effects of a system of knowledge-power that has for millennia deliberately based itself on the fiction of the “transparent self,” who can supposedly be compiled with the techno-scientific model of knowledge by overlaying itself upon it, without ever being put into question by its discourse, innocent war machine that it is.

In this configuration, subjectivity no longer exists except as a lyrical and harmless demand on the

margins of an objectivity of all-powerful technical experts; the particularities of each person, and—even more so—the political consequences of their body-being and their place-having, are no more than the concerns of an aesthetician idled in the face of a knowledge power that attacks, in total bad faith, the idea itself of a human psycho-physical integrity.

The most ferocious anti-humanism of the “human” sciences, for example, is light-years behind medicine, which cures living beings by working from the anatomical paradigm of the dead corpse, and only sees bodies as divided into their parts, organically treatable mental illnesses, immunodeficiency phenomena probably tied to a lack of gratification of the subject... The ethics that gave political meaning to the fact of being in the world, or of no longer being there, dissolve in the overpowering acid of biopower; asexualized organic life made heteronomous under the effects of a toxic environment, which becomes power’s unquestionable object: to make live and let die.

To find meaning in a life that belongs to probes, microscopes, and speculums in foreign hands, to the dispassionate artifacts of science, is now of central political urgency. It was through these bodies, ripped from us by biopolitics as if they were

slated for a clinical resurrection independent of our acts and our choices—and at times even contrary to them—that ecstatic feminism at first aimed to liberate itself. It was a response to the blackmail of a univocal desire that ignored its pleasure with a crude discourse about feminine anatomy, relegated until the sixties to the ambiguity of whispers, in the dim light of confessionals and bedrooms, delivered over to the torture of clandestine abortions. The sense of propriety/shame has doubtless been the most precise of the devices of domination which women have had to deal with, since it is a sense of self inculcated from outside, the performative proof of the existence of which is that it is reproduced by the very subject that it is imposed on. Private life thus becomes a safe shelter from the desocializing threat of shame.

To be your own possible source of crushing dishonor, the mechanisms of whose production you don't control, has been the blackmail that patriarchal desire has so heavily burdened women with by way of their bodies. All dysfunction, all uncertain symptoms, all the shamelessness or manifestations of heterodox desires that this body—which must at all costs be kept docile—might have ever displayed was always condemned as morally unacceptable.

The female body, with its delicate hormonal operation, with its complex pleasure wrapped in a demeaning silence, has remained, in spite of all, the dark continent of all liberation's good intentions. What civilization has done to women's bodies is no different than what it has done to the earth, to children, to the sick, to the proletariat; in short, to everything that is not supposed to "talk," and in general to whatever the knowledge-powers of government and management don't want to hear, which is thus relegated to exclusion from all recognized activity, relegated to the role of a *witness*. But what's the difference between the modest witness, which, disappearing behind a supposed scientific or economic objectivity, conveys "unavoidable" power relations inside its theoretical system, and that other, mute, marginal witness, who no one knows whether it speaks because it is so important to not be able to hear it? The difference has still to do with the body. The man of "objective" knowledge power hides his sexualized, weak psychosomatic existence by delegating the monopoly on violence to a police that can bloody its hands while he goes on feeding the contradictory illusion of human incorporeality in the name of which other bodies can appear to be foreign objects, emotively indifferent. He develops his sensual anesthesia so as to better exert his

knowledge by means of technological prosthesis; he sets separation up as a condition for objectivity and sets up his lack of intimacy with his peers as a necessary professional habit.

The body of those left out of the conversation, on the other hand, is a body that is speaking and unheard, whose central characteristic is that it seeks to reduce separation, because separation for it is but a source of fragility, and never an instrument of power. It is the witness that dissolves itself and passes away along with the object of its witnessing, which cannot remove itself from the womb of domination without dying, which lacks the detachment that allows the subject upheld by the institution (the sole condition on which the self-identical subject can exist) to feign foreignness to the horror of the world, to cut out a delimited space for its complicity with the disaster.

The witness that does not fit into the discourse model authorized by knowledge-power is the paradoxical figure of error and powerlessness; her body, her being-there, only produces the inarticulate cry of she who, by saying "I," seeks vainly to designate herself and thus lies, and takes sides with the guilty ones. There is no virginity among the oppressed, those who are excluded from history, whether they are women, minorities, or a class; on

the contrary, the oppressed is he or she that has no other choice than to participate in the domination machine; the oppressed is indeed even the most dependent product of it, the product least capable of self-determination.

Perspectives for a practice of freedom can only come out of a rupture with the game of signifiers played in the permanent offensive intended to make us identify with ourselves. What must be fought and defeated is our ultimate wariness of letting suffering bodies talk without chaining them to an “I,” because that’s the trap that domination relies on, by denying them when they demand independence, and by making them operate once again when once the toxicity of a life under the yoke of government is painfully clear. The discourse of biopower, both on the topic of our suffering and on the topic of our enjoyment, needs to be silenced. All practices of freedom start there.

EPHEMERAL LOYALTY, IMPOSSIBLE COHERENCE

*The feminine image that man has interpreted
woman with was an invention entirely his own.*

—Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile,
1970

*... and there are no women in the idea of
mankind.*

—A. Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 1995

*Images owe their effectiveness to their epistemic
sentimentality.*

—B. Duden, *On the Female Body as
Public Space*, 1993

*On idle afternoons, I amused myself by counting
the number of times I'd set the table and cleared
it. It came to a sum of a thousand nine hundred
fifty times! One thousand nine hundred fifty
times in ten years! Considering the fact that
every time I have to lay down and pick up an*

average of six plates, two pans, two courses of food, eight sets of silverware, four glasses, two table napkins, a tablecloth, a tablecloth cover, two bottles, the salt, the pepper, the bread, the bread knife, and the fruit bowl—and more if it was a special meal or serving style—that I had to get up and sit down again almost six or seven times per meal, go from the kitchen to the table and from the table to the kitchen cabinet, and repeat that whole thing three times a day, even if breakfast involved less, and not to mention the two times a day I serve coffee—well, go ahead and count it all up! Moving from one place to another around 21 times per day (and that's a modest estimate still), times 365 days, that gives 7665, times ten years' marriage, that makes 76650! Imagine the number of bricks I could have laid if I were a mason! That would have built a good number of houses right there! But alas, I built nothing! It is as if I were plowing the ocean. And tomorrow I'll do it again, and the day after tomorrow, and forever...

—L. Falcon, *Letters to a Spanish Idiot*, 1975

The first impulse that comes to me from this reading is one of refusal: I refuse to accept as true the theory that we, women, have lived and continue living, exploited and managed by man and his history. I'm aware that this protest is a defensive move on my part, but let's at least acknowledge that this could be really tragic for a woman who'd already gone halfway through her life and had

always thought she was doing the best she could, saying to herself (I'm just trying to get at the concept): "you've fooled yourself in everything in life; the values that you thought were just, like family, faithfulness in love, purity, even your work as a housewife: it was all wrong, all the result of a subtle strategy handed down from generation to generation to achieve a continual exploitation of women." I'll say it again: there's something really staggering about it.

—A woman who went back to night school in Italy to get her degree, after her meeting with feminist militants in 1977 (from *Sexual Difference*)

Masculine homosexuality has had a revolutionary reputation because of its not playing the civilizing game of sublimation required by the social pact between men. Masculine homosexuals took politics literally: it is among men, we'll keep it to ourselves; no sweat. But that didn't sort out virile rivalries, it created the *eteria*—the great fraternity, ridding itself of paternalism with a malicious laugh. But that also had to do with the social pact; even if it contained totally different effects of power and corollaries of desire.

The real UFO, people said, was female homosexuality; it was really disloyal, because it removed itself simultaneously from the masculine desire to paternize and the feminine desire to infantilize. The homosexual woman comes from a far off land, from an island, Lesbos; a sea has been placed between them and the rest of the world; they've sailed here from elsewhere—they must certainly not have grown up in any families of ours if they aren't oedipal and don't want children!

So there's a logic to the creation of a universe of lesbian desire within the feminist movements, but the experience of the Italian women's bookstores had to grapple, rather early on, with the contradictions arising from the myth of a "reassuring foreignness," that last ditch effort of the collective unconsciousness to confine women into innocent fault. The foreigner either integrates into the other culture, or comes to represent the non-lawful as wrong: *he is not in his place*.

The construction of *another normalcy*, even a deviant one, can't get us out of the impasse. Desire may change sides, but power just accompanies it with a new productive censorship, another arbitrariness. Imperial "liberalism" accommodates itself quite well, in fact, to anomie and perversion; the contradictions of the old heteronormative world come

back in through the window from outside. It is no longer a question of the form of desire *in itself*, but how it operates within everything that opposes the present domination. It is not about thinking about sexuation against social bonds, but against society: *desire in itself has no autonomy*. As Leo Bersani wrote, for example, contrary to the most typical and worn out commonplaces about S/M, “[if there is some subversive potential in the reversibility of roles in S/M,] a reversibility that puts into question assumptions about power inhering ‘naturally’ in one sex or race, S/M sympathizers have an extremely respectful attitude toward the dominance-submission dichotomy itself” (L. Bersani, “The Gay Daddy,” in *Homos*, 1995).

Abandoning the terrified fear of conformity as well as the rip off of anti-conformism is the only possible amorality within biopower.

If Bloom’s desire reveals no ultimate truths about oppression or freedom, it does on the other hand permit or prohibit desubjectivations; it increases or diminishes collective potential. And since biopower dominates us through our bodies, it is through bodies that we can liberate ourselves from it, by exposing them to violence, danger, pleasure, *outside of the law and the transgression of it*, in the space today occupied by domination.

“THOUGH WE ARE WOMEN, WE ARE NOT AFRAID.”

“Even though we’re women, we aren’t afraid...” sang one of the friends that we shared our mediocre winter vacation house with, every morning as soon as she got out of bed; we mixed together our children until they became young men. She sang while she was bent over picking up sandals and shoes, while fixing shoelaces or sweeping the room. “Hey, at least could you not sing!” we would say to her, to make her cut it out. “You sing the rice transplanters’ fight song while you’re cleaning up after everybody else’s life!” She’d lift her head then and smile as if to excuse herself for the humble enthusiasm that helped her carry on, but her eyes shone with intelligence and conscious joy. Sixty eight was far off yet, and with these words she was singing a hard-won freedom, the pride of ideas, the satisfaction of the research that she was devoting herself to between work, school, and caring for her family; she was singing, at bottom, the pleasure of those days of a choral life, of contact, beyond habit, with the same children,

even if it meant she'd have to provide all kinds of miniscule, continual services.

—L. Adorno, *Sebben Che Siamo Donne*, 1999

The fact that “macho” and “feminist” refer respectively to negative and positive realities according to the generalized filter of political correctness should be immediately telling about the absurdity of choosing between them. All dualist perspectives are a kind of camouflaged policing, in the same way that the construction of a negative automythology is but a pretext for leaving the field of battle without even having fought at all, while putting on airs that you’re not just escaping. The problem that feminisms have historically had to deal with is that critiquing civilization requires more self-criticism than denunciation, more introspection than popular tribunals.

Whoever still sets women up against men will only remain a prisoner of the antinomies of traditional society, play with empty abstractions, and will just increase guilt and confusion. Whoever puts a mother kicked out of Mali with her ten children in the same basket as the holder of a position in some western government ministry because they both belong to an “oppressed gender” is reasoning

within the signifier zoning of domination that they claim to combat, is struggling within the ancillary contradictions of the central contradiction: what makes someone a “man” or a “woman”? How can a given subject’s destiny be reduced to an “anatomical destiny”?

It is an issue of the *de/re/construction* of identity. If we don’t want to chain the oppressed to their condition, and thus if we consider it as contingent, *where do we see their potential as coming from?* From inside, quite simply.

If it is true that force relations modify the identities of the subjects in question, and if it is that, and not what remains unchanged, that is decisive on a political level, then the essentialist temptation starts to fade away.

“When we fill in a form,” writes Teresa De Lauretis, “the majority of us, women, doubtless fill in the F box, and not the M box. It doesn’t even cross our minds to mark the M. That would be deceitful, even worse, it would be to not exist, to erase ourselves from the world. ...As soon as we’ve filled in the F box on the form, though, we’re making our official entrance into the sex/gender system, and we become un-engendered women: which means not only that others consider us as females, but

that from that very moment *we ourselves* represent ourselves as women. And so I ask myself: couldn't we say that the F box we've marked when filling out the form has stuck itself onto us, like a wet gown? Or that when we think that we're being *ourselves* when we fill in the F on the box, that in fact it is the F that's filling us in?" (T. De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender, Essays in theory, film and fiction*, 1987). A woman is no more a woman than a cat is a cat. And starting from that very contingency now we'll have to rewrite, relive, retell the history of women, until there is no more separate history, no more divisions, no more ghettos. The abandonment of resentment which has to precede any kind of a crossgender/mixed hypothesis cannot take place either within a binary vision (oppressor males/oppressed females, or vice-versa) nor within dialectics (the contradiction resolves itself in the mediation = integration of women into the idea of "woman").

What is important in ecstatic feminism is not women (nor men, moreover) but the *desire for autonomy* which dares to be so impudent as to rise up against all social, family, economic, and psychological conventions.

To say that society poses a problem, and not its contradictions, opens a perspective much broader than the question of sexuation conceived of as

separate from an offensive political perspective. The horizon of the mixed hypothesis is one of *partisan war*, a war where men, women, and children practice a non-military discipline, reappropriate violence, and dig in for the long haul to liberate both material and less material spaces.

This kind of an articulation of the fight undoes both discipline and authority simultaneously, and sketches out a different horizon than either the “men’s house” or separatism do.

GENDER

Power produces by classifying and classifies by producing; all taxonomies conclude in accumulation, in the creation of availabilities. Gender is not sex; its concern is not anatomical but kinetic. Its epistemological function is to render legible the bond that exists between the sexual practices of each person, their self-representation as sexualized, and their consequent relational existence, their way of knowing the world and attributing meaning to beings, things, and situations.

Gender is not a reality, nor something natural or given, but an instrument for knowledge and deconstruction. No identity can be fabricated from it, no “sexualized nationalism” can be born from that kind of approach. The goal is to make visible the political technologies for the management of desires, bodies, and identities, so as to modify them or to explode them.

That changes a lot of things about the romanticism of the old style feminisms: neither the good mothers, nor the bad wives, nor the lesbians, nor

the hysterics, nor the nymphomaniacs can serve as a pre-fabricated revolutionary subject to be promoted.

Rather, it is *them as well*, but not as such. The subject of practices of freedom is something that has to be built, in new relationships, beginning with practices that go on the offense.

Political and cultural mediation has been colonized by the fiction of the male sex (and the white race); thus we must go deep into the unsaid and into silence, and that will be the first luddite act against technologies of gender. Ecstatic feminism has something in common with the workers' struggles when they operate in silence. The oppressed have nothing to discuss with power. The relatedness of practice and politics is closer than that of politics and discourse. Freedom can do without small talk. It does not need to indicate its goal; it is its own means and its own ends.

Freed from the obligation of speaking and explaining themselves, women and plebeians have perhaps never walked together in the orderly and imperfect gardens of metaphysics or the "human" sciences, but they have certainly practiced enough gesture politics.

Stealing, carrying out attacks, working or going on strike are all political acts that speak for themselves and don't need any translation; they are self-evident, and they drive home an immediate meaning which conditions the presence and state of the soul. In the same way, cooking dinner, raising kids, loving your husband or not, are all just so many discourses that power just passes off as background noise.

THE CRACK-UP

One has only to skim those old forgotten novels and listen to the tone of voice in which they are written to divine that the writer was meeting criticism; she was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was 'only a woman', or protesting that she was 'as good as a man'. She met that criticism as her temperament dictated, with docility and diffidence, or with anger and emphasis. It does not matter which it was; she was thinking of something other than the thing itself. Down comes her book upon our heads. There was a flaw in the centre of it. And I thought of all the women's novels that lie scattered, like small pock-marked apples in an orchard, about the second-hand book shops of London. It was the flaw in the centre that had rotted them. She had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others.

—V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*,
1929

The most disconcerting things are not the things you never knew before, but the things that you'd known at first and then forgot.

—*Sexual Difference*

Fitzgerald called it the crack-up. It is neither social malaise, nor an epidemic, nor mass misery, nor discontent. The crack-up too, like this text, is a personal matter, in a time of mass impersonality. It has to do with singularity; it is the unclassifiable illness of idiosyncrasies, the disease of forms-of-life as such, which has to do with the complicity that we fail to establish with the world, and which we've given up looking for. With all our capitulations, resistances, defeats and victories, the crack gets longer, stops, and deepens within us, goes from the surface to the depths of the flesh and compromises or preserves the health of the body. What harmony or dissonance there is between civilization and our fates guide the crack: men and women crack up differently. But it is an effect of their subjectivation, not the cause.

The difference between forms-of-life is strictly linked to the differences between the cracks in them. A materialist approach would say that a woman's body is distinct from that of a man, but a non-essentialist approach would also say that it is the way bodies are inhabited that determines their sexual identity. It is a question of "gender," but it is also one of revolt.

How was power able to subjugate so many bodies, with such disorderly impulses and such varying

penchants, to one unique norm of desire and one clearly-defined catalogue of transgressions?

It is a history of everyday repression, by debase-ment and micro-apparatuses, family imprisonment and discouragement, marginalization, criminaliza-tion. By the continual imposition of a identity-coherence with physiologies that don't have any at all, until "men" and "women" ended up created.

And yet...

I'm not telling the story of the crack-up of women as a history of oppression nor of emancipation: women have certainly occupied a subordinate place in the circulation of official power in the West, but they are not a homogeneous class or social group. Either way, this manner of staying apart from it all while remaining totally within it all, of living with our tongues cut out in a world that has always carefully set up the "feminine" difference while pretending not to know it or hiding the fear that it brought up; this whole blackmail that "women" as a cultural category have acquiesced to undergoing is not a scandal that calls for vengeance nor an oppres-sion that demands justice, but a social relationship of "gender" that structures our identities.

In the social shockwave that was feminism there was, doubtless, something that questioned the subjectivation apparatuses that made women out of women (that is, spouses/mothers or whores/crazy bitches), something profoundly foreign to the delirium of quotas or the co-management of phallocracy and its morbid procession of neuroses. The currents of feminism that came out of this observation were the ones furthest from Marxism, which accused it of not having dealt with the problems between men and women, or furthermore, as we would say, of not having allowed men and women to subjectivize themselves differently, not having allowed desires to take other forms besides that of the desire for the family or couple. The possibilities that come out from this manner of posing the question constitute in themselves alone a whole other plane of politics, where Statist mediations are questioned and the function of force relations is seen and described in all its consequences, even those which, not having a supposedly strategic function, only developing in confidential conversations or in the folklore of miscellaneous facts. This approach is the approach of a feminism that I call ecstatic, because it seeks to come out of its struggle and contaminate everything else, because it undermines the very foundations that give rise to it: the socially constructed

identity of men and women, the universalist fiction of the human.

There is no equality possible between men and women, nor between men and men or women and women. The smooth surface of abstract arithmetic that forms the basis for the illusion of democracy constantly cracks under the obvious weight of irreducible ethical differences, under the arbitrary nature of elective affinities, under the suspicion that the circulation of power is a question of *qualities that become incarnate*, that power passes through bodies.

In his 1980-1981 course, Foucault explained how the issue of government is now about the management of behaviors. Power thus becomes biopower, since it gives form to the lives that it manages; to do so, it must take hold of bodies, which are what individualize and separate beings, and acts by way of statistics and observations on the desires that they contain.

Mastery of other people's desires is in effect what makes them into real slaves, because no emancipation that is not *the emancipation of such a desire for emancipation* can get them out of the force relations they struggle within. This mechanism, which is to

be found, moreover, at the very foundation of commodity society, has historically made women into a vibrant human mass, suffering from and raging against the fables of conjugal and maternal happiness that pictured them as somehow flourishing in a circulation of emotions quite simply non-existent in lived reality.

Each ethical polarization, each form-of-life, is but the result of the adherence to a narrative about happiness, one which is often mute but is implicit in the tissue of practices that surround us: it is a question of transmission. Beings move toward their dreamed-of destination of joy and freedom, and if they cross paths on their trajectory, they share a common end of the road. Insurrections are those moments when a curiosity for other wanderers gains the collectivities of travelers, and the mechanisms of subjectivation get jammed up or disrupted. The kinetics of skillfully regulated desires changes, and singular fates are communized against the imperative of conformity. At that moment a potentiality appears on our sonogram screen, but it escapes the range of vision of the panopticon of domination, and not just by chance; the resonance technology that gave rise to modern sonograms was developed for underwater warfare and was then put to a different use [détourned], while the

panopticon serves only one regime of visibility: that of surveillance. War and its technologies can become *partisan*, and thus mixed, and not *exclusively* war-oriented; discipline, however, remains masculine, as a relationship suppressing potentiality, suppressing freedom.

HYSTERICAL WOMEN AND WOMAN LAWYERS

“It’s like this: women have only gotten false news about love. Lots of different news, but all false. And inexact experiences. And yet, they always trust in the news, not in the experiences. That’s why they’ve got so many falsehoods in their heads.”

...

‘You see,’ said Mariamirella, ‘I think I am perhaps afraid of you. But I don’t know where to hide. The horizon is deserted, there’s only you. You are the bear and the cave. That’s why I stay hunkered down in your arms, so that you’ll protect me from my fear of you.’”

—I. Calvino, *Numbers in the Dark
and Other Stories*, 1993

When discussing the laws on sexual violence in Italy, it was clear that contrary to what their opposing interests might suggest, there was an intimate solidarity between the mystifying hysterical woman and the jurist, that they suffered from the same

thing: from a lack of recognition, from undergoing the stranglehold of others' desires without being able to free themselves from it, without knowing how to oppose to it any kind of a singularity, which was too crushed and too discouraged to rise up against it as a refusal. Is a woman that pretends that she's been raped, and reports a crime that didn't take place, more delirious than a woman who fastens herself to a law that negates her? Is that woman, the pretender, who believes she has been raped, any more wrong than the woman who believes she has rights? "The pretender in the strict sense of the word," writes Lia Cigarini, "reveals something that all of us really are, even when we manage to control ourselves. The women's movement has had to deal with pretenders many times. Faced with the women's assemblies, they were obliged to refute their stories, or their stories were refuted by the judges after interrogation. But for the representatives of the law, the pretender, the hysteric, by inventing a crime, is mocking the law. And it all ends up looking quite ridiculous. The most ridiculed of all are obviously the women who believe in the law... And faced with that, what sort of kind gestures should be made, what kind of political practice should be used? Trying to understand the hysteric's message (she who appears to uphold the law and the man's

desire, but only by distorting it, and whose theatrics refute her claims) or punishing her because she's made us look bad?" (L. Cigarini, 'Symbolic Rape,' in *Il Manifesto*, 1979).

In the pretender's suffering, abutting mental illness in its unencodability, there is the expression of a refusal of her own slavery pushed so far that she can hardly recognize it as really existing. "It was false," we read in *Sexual Difference*, "to want to deal with the contradiction between the sexes by intervening in the pathological moment of rape and by isolating it from the whole of the feminine destiny, its ordinary forms, where the 'invisible violence' that rips from the feminine sex its living unity as a body-mind is consummated." The emotion-colonizing form of domination produces an impossibility in its subjects, the impossibility of making use of their own feelings as hermeneutic instruments, the impossibility of second guessing themselves while seeking to escape the familiar, mine-riddled terrain. Most often these subjects come up against so radical an incapacity of finding a space for a non-submission that it is seen as disloyal even by those who should unite there. But, Cigarini continues, "from the moment that I find myself in a trial, who gives me the possibility of reacting to the symbolic

rape of the judge, the lawyer, the law? ... This law regulates an internal contradiction in the world of men. There are men with deviant behavior relative to bourgeois morality. The regulation of this contradiction takes place in trials" ("Symbolic Rape").

The reassuring foreignness to the world of law turns suddenly into despair at the moment of rape, a despair borne of the anatomical interpretation that our culture injects into women's destinies.

Even when a woman might manage to "reappropriate" the few scraps of "femininity" that have still not been colonized by the medical profession, by the Spectacle, traditional machismo, or religion, what could she do with that if she can't recover her desires as well, if her unconscious is not energized at the same speed as her need for liberation? What should be done with women who have "rape fantasies" and get pleasure out of being raped?

To counter the prison that coincides with their corporeity, women have even come to blame male desire as such, to refuse penetration by reappropriating the most macho reading of it, to proclaim a female homosexuality, declared as against the implicit masculine homosexuality that has built the foundation of the patriarchal order. That was a step backwards to a strategy contrary to everything

that while it had indeed undermined them, had also made certain feminist political experiments extraordinarily rich: the refusal to espouse any kind of hierarchies at all; the will to not take on any names, priorities, rules; and confronting contradictions as they present themselves every time, without haste or arrogance, without preventing their eruption or channeling them off.

The strength of feminism was that it didn't propose a model for liberation, but that it sought out a kind of freedom that would be coextensive with existence, a form-of-life that would also be a form of struggle.

There was an unprecedented unavailability there, which doubtless helped render the feminist movement quite unappealing, and which justified itself by affirming that "availability has ended up becoming the forced condition for the survival of women. To think about living only in terms of making others live: it seems that women have no other way to symbolically legitimate their existence. This is the most tragic and the most difficult condition to change" (*Convegno dell'Umanitaria*, 1984).

But there was also a powerful rejection of political and identity representation there, one that struck right at the heart of the whole institution of

democracy and republic. Women who didn't want to see the passage of the law on sexual violence held that "if the representation is institutionalized, and attributed on the basis of formalist criteria, like, for instance, the aims written into a statute, solidarity becomes presumptuous, independent of reality; the struggle becomes a mere ritual, and the awakening of consciousness becomes the banal registering of a piece of normative data" (*Sexual Difference*).

MOM-‘N’-POP AND US VICTORIANS

A long time afterwards, when he was old and blind, Oedipus smelled a familiar smell one day while walking down the road. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said:

“I would like to ask you a question. Why did I not recognize my own mother?”

“You answered incorrectly,” said the Sphinx.

“But it was my answer that made all this possible.”

“No,” he replied. “When I asked you who walks with four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered ‘Man.’ You didn’t mention women.”

“When we say Man,” said Oedipus, “we also include women. Everyone knows that.”

“That’s what you think,” answered the Sphinx.

—Muriel Rukeyser, *Myth*, 1978

The voice of ecstatic feminism is thus not a voice of women. Its strength, the source of the contempt for it by the mixed revolutionary political groups that preceded it in existence, is that it poses

not only the question of the *relational means* of struggle, but also brings up the issue of the plane of consistency. In effect, it has never really been a question of critiquing alienated relations as bad means of struggle as the non-violent movement did for example; rather it is about clarifying the way the prolongations of power's modes of circulation within the contested society, in supposedly subversive practices, made them ineffective.

The herd-mentality social conservatism, which still characterizes a number of subversive formations, arises from too simplistic a questioning or refusal of the capitalist economy. The typical thinking, which does not take into consideration the fact that in the relations between the sexes there is *a different dialectics* at play, one without masters or slaves, will thus remain only all too obviously complicit with the object it is supposed to be fighting against.

It is difficult to imagine the emancipation of the oppressed where oppression is but a coded source of enjoyment, even indeed the only one that is socially acceptable.

Hence it is not at random that Marxism all too often pulls back discreetly in the face of so loaded an issue as "oppression," preferring the more aseptic term "exploitation," which saves it the risk of

breaking down into psychologism. But the problem is that there is no objective, quantifiable measure of exploitation, since it too is part of the domain of the *qualitative*. The issue is not about how *much* a person is exploited, but *how*, and from what perspective exploitation is but a subjectivation mechanism that once it is broken leaves nothing to liberate. Because the preventive social delegitimation of certain desires by power makes these desires into the source of such guilt that the subjects are not even capable anymore of feeling them without a kind of self-destruction. The complex psychological dialectic that makes the reformist into the revolutionary's most dangerous enemy in reality counterposes them on the basis of their two incompatible approaches to enjoyment; revolutionaries hold that the essential indecency of all desires for life will end up winning out over the morbidity of their repression, that identities elaborate themselves in a relational and contingent manner, and that they can never establish themselves on the basis of any shared social conformity.

Marxism talks about the "false desires" we are filled with by Capital, but it does not speak of subjectivation; on what basis then can the bodies extracted from the State's chain links of identity relate to one another? That falls outside of the scope of

the concern of the materialist, who instead attacks the private property of bodies, slavery, violence, and then comes up against certain inexplicable things, like S/M, the desire to be pregnant, wife-swapping clubs.

Engels could say all he liked that within the family the woman is the proletarian and the man is the bourgeois, since the man is remunerated and publicly recognized, and the woman is exploited and relegated to the silence of bare life, but his comparison comes up against a stumbling block in the fact that in society the bourgeoisie gives no pleasure to the proletariat, and love or desire only mix in an oblique manner in their relations. Even today, the most surprising blind spot of the typical thinking remains sexual relations, while the family and familialism continue doing marvelously well and end up invariably reconstituted in as false alternatives to capitalist relations. Incarnating a situation where the circulation of power does not intersect the circulation of money, which is thus supposed to be more pure and more revolutionary, the paradigm of the family continues to structure imaginations and practices that had intended to break with society. Libidinal economy, which Marxism so spectacularly fails to analyze, is indeed the first thing that needs to be looked at, because it is the tender and

innocent heart of all systems of power, which in itself calls up in us an irresistible complicity.

“In the countries of the Communist bloc,” writes Carla Lonzi, “the socialization of the means of production has in no way undermined the traditional family institution; on the contrary, it has reinforced it, insofar as it has reinforced the prestige and role of the patriarchal figure. The content of the revolutionary struggle has taken on and expressed personalities and values that are typically patriarchal and repressive, and which have had repercussions throughout the organization of society, first as a paternalist state, and then as a truly authoritarian and bureaucratic state. Its classist conception, and thus its exclusion of women as an active party in the elaboration of the themes of socialism, has made this revolutionary theory into a patricentric one... Marx himself had a traditional married life, absorbed in his scholarly ideologue’s labors, and loaded down with children one of whom he had had with his housekeeper. The abolition of the family in effect means neither the common possession of women, as Marx and Engels themselves showed, nor the other formula which would make women into an instrument of ‘progress,’ but rather the liberation of a part of humankind that had made its voice heard and fought, for the first time

in history, not only against bourgeois society but against any kind of a society designed with man as the primary protagonist, thus going much further than the struggle against the economic exploitation that Marxism denounced” (C. Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel*, 1974).

UNCLASSABLE

“Once it has been established that man is not ‘violence’ and woman ‘gentleness’ (since that split was made by men and against women) and that violence is neither masculine nor feminine; once it has been established that the difference is, on the contrary, between liberated violence and non-liberated violence, it then becomes a matter of trying to experience and practice it differently. By ensuring that it won’t produce what is defined as the ‘militarization of consciousness’ by following its own totalizing rules.”

—I. Faré & F. Spirito, *Mara and the Others*, 1982

“‘For woman,’ we read [in Tennyson], ‘is not undeveloped man, but diverse.’ The ‘diverse’ is of course wonderfully familiar—vive la difference. His bromide ‘not like to like, but like to difference’ simply passes off traditional inequalities as interesting variety. Under this formulation, the male will continue as of old to represent force, authority, and status, ‘the wrestling thews that throw the world,’ the female will go on at ‘child-ward care’ as well as supplying the ‘childlike in the larger mind.’ Flattery gives way to insult.”

—*Sexual Politics*

Reappropriating difference, which meanwhile has become biopower's primary management tool, is obviously a lost cause. Symmetrically, to count on its negation, on the legalist abstraction of equality, is an error that time will not forgive. This difference was played out "against" women in order to exclude them (from the public sphere, from the circulation of power) and "for" them in the hypocrisy of galantry granted them in virtue of an innocence and virginity directly indexed to that marginality.

The family is the primordial space for the distribution of responsibilities, just as it is the first source of subjectivation. There, the biological destiny of woman, and now the citizen-destiny of civil-unioned homosexuals, is accomplished with the full blessing of society.

The class struggle starts limping when it crosses the threshold of the family home: another economy reigns there. Affective gratification has no buying power, the work of family attention does not need any syndicalists, and classical politics starts to stutter; the norm gets the last word.

"Even if it was something quite new and disturbing, a detained comrade could easily recognize a common law criminal as a proletarian, as a potential 'revolutionary subject'; such a recognition was

sanctioned by the traditions of political struggle. Thanks to his uniquely 'pre-political' self-consciousness, he represented and expressed an antagonism toward the system in any case simply by his illegal action. To go beyond crimes against property (the most common ones according to statistical data), to start struggling against the capitalist system is part of a logical approach that certainly supposes a political synthesis, but which also comprises a reasoned and determined thinking. But a woman, who has committed the classical 'pre-political' crime of infanticide, that crime against the family, cannot follow such a linear trajectory. How could we recognize an infanticide as our sister in the struggle against the expropriation machine run by Capital? Her prison is much deeper and more internal; she's been violently rejected and her act proves it... If men have a cultural, political, and symbolic patrimony at their disposal to 'justify' their violent acts, what patrimony could the 'infanticide mother' invoke to justify hers?

"Nonetheless, could the family, the child, the husband, not be just so many elements of material oppression, could they not be the symbols of a hopeless misery, the symbol of a cage that could cause a woman to momentarily lose her psychic balance and carry out an insane act? ... If it is true that

the comrades understood deeply and powerfully that the material conditions of their detainment, which themselves could bring about a unity starting from here and now, could also be turned against the institution, they had a lot of trouble giving any meaning or 'political unity' to these solitary rebellions, stripped of any immediate self-control, within the system of class oppression" (*Mara and the Others*).

A CERTAIN SKEPTICISM

Blowback from repressed urges threatens all my work, research, and political projects. It threatens them, or is it rather that that is what's truly political in me, which needs relief and space? ... Silence defeated, denied that part of me that desired to get into politics, but it affirmed something new too. There was a change; I started to speak, but nowadays I understand that it was the affirmative part of me taking up all the space once again. I convinced myself that the silent woman is the most fecund objection to our politics. The 'non-political' digs out tunnels that we have not yet filled in with earth.

—Lia, Sottosopra #3, 1976

It seems that in 1977 someone put up a poster in the Milan Women's Bookstore that read THERE IS NO FEMINIST POINT OF VIEW, and that said poster remained on the wall for a number of years. There was a feminist *movement* that passed through what is called feminism, now that it is no more: but it wasn't a movement of identity reconstruction or of

identity construction, or at least not in the aspects that I define as *ecstatic*; it more resembled a *demolition process*, which was totally coherent with its presuppositions. Because to integrate oneself into a civilization that so recently excluded us entirely, or to propose another one which would operate better so as to help resolve its little collapse problem, is an unsustainable choice.

The feminization of labor in the west corresponded to a need to modernize the production apparatus: the exploitation of women at home was simply no longer sufficient. Fordism was male, with all its pride, its dirty hands, its blue overalls, its brute force in struggles and in factories. The worker was a professional specializing in his own exploitation, a dilettante of existence. Production was his domain, and reproduction the space of his incompetence. Already, nothing but the regeneration of his own labor power was “his problem” anymore, and even that was all up to his wife, as was caring for the children and doing the upkeep of the house. The worker in Fordism traversed a life loaded down with machines and fatigue, returned dirty and hollowed out every day into a family cell where bodies were domesticated and affected differently than were those of his colleagues in the libidinal cemetery of the factory, and eventually he died ignorant

and full of rage, fallen victim to his dispossession of a power of which he did not even know the name, the victim of a suffering of which he had not even found the source.

Women's refusal to collaborate in maintaining the ignorance of a life sponsored by Capital is part of what I call ecstatic feminism. Its scandal was that it spoke the language of pleasure, not that of demands; its novelty was that it removed itself from the strategic sphere which forces contestation and its object to live in what is most often a fatal contiguity.

The paradoxical and ephemeral proximity between feminism and the workers' movement was based in their reciprocal attack on Fordism, where the machine logic of industrial production was opposed by the demand for a human rhythm, and the mechanical arithmetic of factory time was opposed by the incommensurability of the time of life. But this convergence was problematic: though the men could besiege the conventional terrain of wage labor with their struggles, or contest it with a refusal to work, women had a more precarious, less codified position, because their work was unrecognized and unquantified, and their work was basically coextensive with their lives. Speaking of equality in the language of males, the language of unions, in

order to struggle against wage inequalities and the under-employment of women in skilled work really just came down to a legitimating of the real system of underground slavery that had led to such a situation; that is, the continual extraction of surplus value from all the domestic and familial activities of women under cover of the necessity, ordained by social norms, for emotional “reciprocity.”

But the bitterness of such an observation produced an immediate extinguishment of any real solidarity with any male struggles, a violent desire for separatism, for the interruption of the *double bind* that gnaws away at the lives of all women in the struggle, by requiring them to separate out a private dimension—where level-headed judgment is crushed by the need to indulge everyone and the obligation to adhere to the norms that were the source of women’s idea of love—from the political or social dimension where we speak the language of those same men that we pardon at home, hoping to be recognized outside of it as something other than a housewife.

If the Sisyphus’ labor of the worker was miserable, his unhappiness was at least socially ritualized and politically recognized; Penelope’s misery on the other hand, from inhabiting the double constraint of being married and neglected, faithful but

coveted by a man who an absent husband fails to chase off, separated from a spouse that forgets her but feeding his memory so as not to lose dignity in her own eyes—that misery has no place. The suffering of those who lose sleep over having to lie to themselves and to others in order to conform to some contradictory stereotype (the good mother, the diligent worker, the liberated woman, the faithful spouse, the comrade, the sock-cleaning washerwoman, the intellectual, the sweet girl...) or other—that suffering is considered obscene. Making and unmaking the weaving of a social fabric impregnated with ignorance of the body, joy, children, and feelings are a labor with no vacation or compensation. Whatever obligates so many women to float within the most superficial layer of existence, between fear and frivolity, still finds no ear to listen to it and no struggle to defy it.

BARTLEBY: ECSTATIC FEMINIST

1) *The home, where we do the majority of the [domestic labor] is atomized into thousands of sets of four walls, but it is present everywhere, in the country, the city, the mountain, etc.*

2) *We are monitored and controlled by thousands of little bosses and inspectors: these are our husbands, fathers, brothers, etc., but still we have only one master: the State.*

3) *Our comrades in work and in the struggle, who are our women neighbors at home, are not physically in contact with us at work as is the case in a factory; but we can meet each other in agreed-upon places that we all go to by using a few famous little periods of time that we cut out of our day. And none of us are separate from the other by virtue of any stratifications of qualifications and categories. We all do fundamentally the same work.*

...If we go on strike, we won't be leaving products incomplete or raw materials untransformed, etc.; by interrupting our work we won't paralyze production, but we will paralyze the everyday reproduction of the working class. That will strike at the heart of Capital, because it will effectively become a strike even for those who normally

would have gone on strike without us; but as soon as we no longer guarantee the survival of those to whom we are emotionally attached, we will also have difficulties to face in continuing our resistance.

—Emilian Wages for Domestic
Labor Coordination, Bologna, 1976

They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.

They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism.

Every miscarriage is a work accident.

Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both working conditions...but homosexuality is workers' control of production, not the end of work.

More smiles? More money. Nothing will be so powerful in destroying the healing virtues of a smile.

Neuroses, suicides, desexualization: occupational diseases of the housewife.

—Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, 1975

The worker has resources available to him to unionize, to go on strike; mothers are isolated from one another, in their houses, tied down to their children by merciful bonds. Our wildcat strikes manifest themselves most often in the form of physical or mental breakdowns.

—Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*,
1980

It is not too clear how it was that Bartleby decided one day to spend the night in his office. His gray existence as a petty employee fades into leisure time, which suddenly appears impossible; his inertia one day just brings an end to his weak will to compartmentalize his work and his life: they are for him two incompatible possibilities, two impossibilities following each other in sequence. Bartleby does not play the game; he lives his life as an employee and conducts himself at his post as if he could calmly just live there. Surely he has no home, no family, no love, no wife. So? In this desolate universe, peopled by tasks to accomplish and abstract relationships between worker-men, Bartleby *prefers not to*. Bartleby goes on a totally new kind of strike, which wears down his boss like no luddism could. "Indeed," affirms his boss, resigned, "it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were." Bartleby is surprised hanging around at the office on Wall Street on a Sunday, half-undressed, but no one finds the firmness of mind to kick him out: everyone just assumes that that must be where he belongs. "For I consider that one, for the time, is sort of unmanned," continues his boss, "when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him, and order him away from his own premises."

The master's authority is here deposed by a generic act of refusal: it is not violence, just the pale solitude of someone who "prefers not to," who haunts the consciousness of the office boss, just like it has haunted the lives of so many husbands pushed away with the same firm, unjustified determination of a negative preference, harder than any unappealable refusal.

The bad conscience of classical virility, personified by the Master in Chancery, Bartleby's superior, prevents it from freeing itself of this mute specter that does not demand anything anymore, refuses everything, and by its simple obstinate presence alludes to a different kind of world, where the offices would no longer be places where accountants undergo their tiresome slavery, and where the bosses would take orders. "I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages," clarifies his boss. This gentleman is a calm, *balanced* person, and nonetheless he loses all agency faced with Bartleby. His mild-mannered non-submission seduces him; his strike action contaminates him; he wants to let go and abandon an authority that becomes suddenly burdensome to him, and at the height of his unexplainable sympathy for his do-nothing employee, he resolves

to opt for the least logical of solutions: “Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I; I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs; in short, I never feel so private as when I know you are here. At least I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content. Others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain.” No strike in history has won such favorable conditions as these: the boss comes to be convinced of the essentially abusive character of his role, and the refusal of work gives rise to its remunerated abolition. Bartleby’s strike, which in this sense is similar to that of the feminists, is a *human strike*, a strike of gestures, dialogue, a radical skepticism in the face of all forms of oppression that are taken for granted, including the most unquestioned of emotional blackmail or social conventions, such as the need to get up and go to work and then come home from the office once it is closed. But it is a strike that does not extend itself out, that does not contaminate the other workers with its negative preference syndrome, because Bartleby explains nothing (that’s his great strength), and has no legitimacy; he is not threatening to not do anything anymore, so he is

still upholding his contractual relationship with the boss, he simply reminds him that he has no more duty than he has desire, and that his preference happens to be for the abolition of work. "But thus it often is," continues the boss of the office, "that the constant friction of illiberal minds wears out at last the best resolves of the more generous." A human strike without a communization of morals ends up as a private tragedy, and is considered a personal problem, a mental illness. His colleagues, circulating in the office during the day, demand obedience from Bartleby, that employee that walks along with his hands in his pockets; they give him orders, and faced with his categorical refusal to carry them out and his absolute impunity, they are perplexed and feel that they have somehow become the victims of some sort of unspeakable injustice. The metaphor is even too clear; one can all too easily imagine the threat of 'unmanning' felt by lawyers and magistrates when their authority is ignored and scorned by a simple accountant. "And what could I say? At last I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was running round, having reference to the strange creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much. And as the idea came upon me of his possibly turning out a long lived man, and keep

occupying my chambers, and denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional reputation; and casting a general gloom over the premises. [...] I resolved to gather all my faculties together, and for ever rid me of this intolerable incubus.”

Bartleby—does it even need to be said?—dies in prison, because his solitary de/occupation did not spread.

In the same way as he never believed himself to be an accountant, he did not later believe himself to be a prisoner. His radical skepticism never found the comfort of any belonging, but in this disturbing short story, which stages a master-slave dialectic much more perverse and corrosive than that of the Hegelian paradigm, there is also the promise of a coming practice. The below-market work of women, in light of its congruence with life, can only be ground to a halt by a wildcat strike of behaviors, a human strike, which comes out of the kitchens and beds, speaks up at assemblies. The human strike puts forth no demands; rather it deterritorializes the agora, reveals the “non-political” to be the implicit place for the distribution of non-remunerable responsibilities and labor. Some women from the Italian movement explained this: “We find no criteria for, and have no interest in, separating politics

from culture, love, and work. A separate politics like that displeases us and we would never be able to carry it out” (L. Cigarini & L. Muraro, “Politics and Political Practice,” in *Marxist Critique*, 1992).

What happened with the transition to post-Fordism, which integrated women into the productive sphere better than any prior mode of production, was a growing indifferentiation of the space-time of work and the space-time of life. More and more, workers find themselves in Bartleby’s situation, which was exclusively the female situation until the end of the twentieth century in the West, but they ‘prefer not to’ refuse, for the time being. Work and life are tangled up to what is perhaps an unprecedented extent, for both sexes; what once was only females’ economic oppression is now unisex, and the human strike appears to be the only solvent possible for the situation. Because ‘preferring not to’ is now equal to preferring *not to be* an accountant, a telecommuter, a woman, and that’s something that has to be done by a number of people together.

Negative preference is above all a political act: “I am not what you see here” gives rise to “Let’s be another possible now.” By no longer believing what other people say about you, by opposing the

political intensity of your existence to the mundanities of recognition, above all not *wanting* any power, because power mutilates, power demands, power makes you mute and then other people will talk for you, will speak within you without you even perceiving it; that is how we escape, that is how we go on human strike. But already, schizophrenia is watching over all the detached ones, all the dupes of power, all the *scabs* of the human strike.

ON POLITICAL VENTRILOQUISM

*Whoever said ideology is my adventure?
Adventure and ideology are incompatible.
My adventure is me.*

...

*A day of depression
A year of depression
A hundred years of depression
I let go of ideology, and I'm nothing anymore
Distraction is my ordeal.
I'll never again have a single moment of prestige
At my disposal
I'm losing my attraction
I won't be your point of reference anymore.*

...

*Whoever said that emancipation was unmasked?
Now you're courting me...
You expect an identity from me and you don't
make up your own mind
You had the identity of a man and you don't
leave it behind
You pour your conflict onto me and you are
hostile to me.
You attack my integrity
You'd like to put me on a pedestal
You'd like to put me under your guardianship
I distance myself and you don't forgive me*

*You don't know who I am and you act like you
can be my mediator
I say what I have to say alone.*

...

*Whoever said my cause profited off you?
Your career has profited off me.*

—“Me I say Me,” in *Rivolta
Femminile*, 1977

In 1977, in Italy, a text entitled *Me I Say Me* appeared in the magazine *Rivolta Femminile*, a sort of open letter to the democratic feminists, who were more and more publicly appearing in the joyous and colorful protests that spectacular history passes off as Feminism with a capital F.

A feeling of unease toward political ventriloquism was already widespread at the time and was theorized as part of the need to give a coherent voice to one's own body, which is strictly impossible in biopolitical democracies.

“After the first day and a half,” recalls a participant in the Pinarella conference, “a strange thing happened to me: beneath these talking, listening, laughing heads, there were bodies: though I was speaking (I was really quite overcome with a calm serenity and free of any self affirmation when speaking before those two hundred women!) in my own

words, in some way or other it was like my body had found some strange way of making itself heard” (Serena, *Sottosopra* #3, 1976).

The problem of the head ceaselessly seeks a solution in radical feminist movements; looking at it, it becomes clear that it is urgent that a remedy be found for the gap between the absence of sophistication and feminine refinement in discourse, and the excess of it in bodies. That genealogies of women, not familial but cultural, need to be sought out. The search for a different mode of expression here lacks that avant-gardist tone that tries to say things differently to set itself apart, but the urgency of making discourse itself into the terrain for the expression of different possibilities, which exposes it as a place of conflict, a place where implicit force relations are openly revealed. It was a matter of making bodies and their stories exist in a different way, via a symbolic disengagement. In the case of women, outside of the *qualities* that are attributed to them by the masculine yardstick—whether it is held by a man or woman makes no difference—“they can only exist in the empirical sense, so that their life is a *zoe* rather than a *bios*. It does not surprise us,” writes Adriana Cavarero, “that the in-born urge toward the self-exhibition of one’s uniqueness crystallizes, for many women, in the desire for *bios*

as a desire for biography” (A. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 2000). That’s where self-consciousness becomes a simultaneous practice of reshaping and sharing, the production of subjectivity through discourses, and of discourse through subjectivities.

In 1979, a woman participating in an armed feminist group spoke the following, anonymously, over a telephone: “I am preservation, self-preservation, everyday life, adaptation, conflict mediation, the release of tension, the survival of the objects of my love, nourishment; I am all of that against myself, against the possibility of understanding who I am and how to construct my own life; I *am*, precisely *in* my madness, *in* my self-destruction. And so I look into myself and try to stop thinking about what’s good and what’s bad, what’s right and what’s false... I feel a need to smash myself, to burst, to not always think in a continuity with my own history. Maybe that’s because I have no history, perhaps because everything I see as being my history appears otherwise to me, like a suit of clothes put on my back that I can’t get off of me... And so then I start to think about the act of smashing myself, bursting, fragmenting myself, about searching for myself within our collective research, our possibilities, our collective utopias, meaning that I can’t break with

my resignation and subordination if I don't break with the enemies that I have unmasked, if I don't recognize my rage, and if I don't make it explode with my violence against the ideology and apparatus of violence that oppresses me... If I don't find in other women as well my desire to get out, to attack, to destroy... To destroy, to take down all the walls and all the barriers..." (*Mara and the Others*).

Feminine anonymity, the absence of women from the great narrative of History, makes silence preferable to them over self-exposure, subtraction over heroism. To be extraordinary, to be an exception, is for women a risk of separation from the silent mass of her comrades; it is more than a betrayal of her class, it is almost social suicide. "By definition," says another woman who had chosen armed struggle, "'woman' does not think. If a woman puts herself outside of the established order, people say that she's doing it because she's '*following*' her husband, or her ongoing bout with madness... When I started to say 'no' at home, I didn't know how to do it; I was afraid. I watched men very carefully, to imitate them; I 'absorbed' them, and understood that I could do things like them too. But that wasn't enough to liberate me. They were afraid too, of me even..." (*Mara and the Others*). The issue of

biography is, for women, a question of *how to do it*. If there is no material prison confining them to their role or to silence, how can the image of us that others give to us be demolished without our destroying ourselves? For women, biography is thus a technical issue rather than one of narcissism; the narrative of the self is the answer to the question "how have other women who wanted to be neither 'women' nor 'women who want to be like men' gotten out of that?" How, in sum, can a woman's body come to hold a discourse that was not intended for it, which on the contrary was intended to shut her up. How can we get out of silence while remaining anonymous, while remaining an anybody, which represents the only manner of undoing political ventriloquism.

When ecstatic feminism seized upon it, this attention to discourse as the privileged vehicle of power had hardly surged forth, and had no promising future in the bad faith of the denizens of the universities; if there was something exemplary in this quest for a language capable of giving political dignity to the submerged, unencoded everyday existence of a multitude of women thirsting after meaning for their existence, it was the refusal of all the principles of authority. This research inaugurated a new logic

of war, not about becoming impervious to attack by outside adversaries, but about the struggle against the inner enemy. Where physical demobilization and symbolic decolonization coincide in a movement of self-removal.

It was a gesture intended to be free, one that demand the right to be wrong for itself (and that's always also the right to wander, to vagabondage, to the broadest possible discovery). But it was also one that refused to be corrected, and eventually came to critique the law, the prison system, and the movement of the *delegislation* of ecstatic feminism in this sense remains a fundamental heritage to counterpose against the imperialism of integration at all costs and at every advance of *political correctness*. This was scandalous when, in the middle of their struggle for the right to abort, women said that they didn't want any laws on their bodies, on rape, on maternity. That they didn't want any more laws *at all*.

Because the only honorable departure from a minority status is not the achievement of recognition by the dominating majority or a change in force relations, but the deconstruction of the whole

mechanism of recognition itself and of the idea of victory. We read, in the *Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile* from 1971: “We refuse to tolerate the affront that a few thousand signatures by men and women can serve as a pretext to ask the men in power, the legislators, for something that was in reality the content expressed by the lives of thousands of women sent off to the slaughterhouses of clandestine abortion.” To accept being pulled away from the opaque zone of non-law, from the arbitrariness of emotional relations—which, as we know, is something no one should mess with—only to be brought under the degrading spotlight of spectacular politics, was the primary error made by feminism; all the questions that it had brought up have since then remained dangerously unresolved, and the path to posing them once again is now barred. What is more demeaning than seeing a movement that demanded a new political space fall back on the very movement that had deliberately organized its exclusion, with a mélange of family-mother good sense that knows that “either way we just have to make it work out” and the pride of the liberated woman that fixes the motor of her car by herself?

One can read a distressing demonstration of this compromise in *Two Women in the Kingdom of Men*

by Roselyne Bachelot and Genevieve Fraisse: “We must always pay attention to our physical appearance... We are always on the edge of the knife. If we have too short a dress on, or too low-cut a neckline on our shirt, it’ll shock people. But if we put on a suit that looks like a bag of apples, we get jibes... I remember a public meeting in Millau, in a disused movie house, with a very high podium and nothing to hide our legs. At the end of the meeting, a gentleman came up to tell me, ‘you got a nice white slip on, there!’ One can thus see that nothing is truly made for women” (1999). You start with skirts, and end up with a desire to affirm yourself on the stage, in the image of men...

The abstraction of institutional politics is not reappropriable by women inasmuch as the figure of the citizen, which is at its center, exists *against* the material and singular nature of bodies, for and in the logic of representation. The impossible “woman-citizen,” capable of integrating herself into classical politics by hiding her shame of being ashamed of not being a man, haunts the female body with another specter: that of the fetus. What is still not even a bout with nausea for her is already a body to be governed by the State. The fetus is the citizen that the woman carries in her womb, which is invisible and has no existence but is already a

subject of the law against her, as spoken by biopower.

“In the space of a few years,” writes Barbara Duden, “The *child* has become a *fetus*, the pregnant *woman* has become a *uterine feeding system*, the baby to be born became a *life*, and ‘life’ became a *catholic-secular value*, and thus omni-comprehensive” (*On the Female Body as Public Space*).

The female body as potential citizen-factory is born alongside the birth of what Foucault calls biopolitics. “After 1800,” writes Barbara Duden, “the insides of women became something public, and that from the medical perspective, as well as the police and legal perspective, even while parallel to that, ideologically and culturally, the privatization of her outer form was undertaken. What I think we’re dealing with here are the tracks left by a distinctively contradictory development, both of the ‘creation’ of woman as a scientific fact over the course of the nineteenth century, and that of the *citizen* of industrial civilization” (*On the Female Body as Public Space*). The thinkers of this Enlightenment thus organized another regime of visibility and predictability

for living bodies which demanded to scrutinize the insides of women and which transformed her physiology into a public space. Between medication and political representation there is a coincidence which is not merely chronological: both the citizen and the fetus are fictions produced by biopower, and as such are the sworn enemies of ecstatic feminism.

THE BLEAK DAMAGE DONE BY THE REPRESSIVE HYPOTHESIS. GENEALOGY OF MISANDRY.

The knowledge of the rudiments of psychoanalysis had by our contemporaries comes down to a confused ensemble of strategies for “not getting taken for a ride” and “not getting your toes stepped on.” Western women looking for professional affirmation quite often find themselves with a Cinderella complex that can only very rarely be explained by their biographies; they are specialists in that sport which consists in disarming those with bad intentions before they even become such, sweeping out all innocence and naïvety so much so as to destroy even the homeopathic element in it that permits human relations to exist. “*Never get fucked*” is the banner under which a whole

generation of cynical capitalist women marches, women who justify doing the most horrible shit by pointing to a ghostly masculine oppression they discovered in books.

With them, the hatred of men—already energetically rejected by a good part of the firstever feminism of the sixties—comes back in force in the form of a demand that men be domesticated. The champions of economico-bureaucratico-infrastructural submission impose all the commodity oppression possible on their husbands so as to obtain at least a kind of *equality from below* where they cannot practice an inequality where they'd be the winners. The mutilation inflicted on both sexes and their desire is replaced by the vengeance of one sex against another, which thus is only an intent to settle accounts and only feeds resentment. The economic and social emancipation of women thus ended up becoming one of the most appalling defeats the human race has suffered: the reinforcement everywhere of oppression, the proliferation of misunderstandings and the increase of separation have been the only tangible consequences. Those who rejoice every time they see a woman doing a job that was traditionally reserved for men, because “it was the lack of work that was harming women,” sometimes need to be reminded of the inscription

over the gates of Auschwitz. There is no possible practice of freedom starting from a *need for obedience* as expressed by the comical push for “equality of opportunity.”

The political proposition of ecstatic feminism concerns relations between beings, and not only between sexes. It is about working to make the sexes cease obeying the patterns set out for them, such as the pattern of “command → execution” or of “implicit demand → punishment of those who ignore it.” Moreover, the primary dissension between men and women is centered around contempt for a desired being: women are obviously capable of it, but they experience it as a personal and social frustration; men in the scenario often appear reassured by it. Never making any demands on women, which is in its enchanted variant called “gallantry,” is above all justified by the refusal to allow them to be direct interlocutors, and by the demand that they only be interpreters of *signs*, which becomes, in the rambling nonsense of common sense, the clichés that “women are sensitive,” or “they have an intuitive sense.”

This also obviously concerns sexual relations, and in particular those that could be defined as heteronormative. If in the occasional sexual relation between a man and woman it is the latter that “loses out” in the eyes of whatever collectivity, it is not just because she risks becoming pregnant—which was already easily preventable by nonpenetrative sexual practices long before technology maliciously came to our aid—but because in the sexual exchange men *take* pleasure and are not supposed to give any.

The woman gives herself; she lets herself be conquered, or worse, she offers herself. And if that offer is irregular, it produces anomie, breaks the balance, and becomes an inflation of pleasure offered that suddenly transforms the very idea of the sexual exchange.

Female pleasure, which is invisible and physiologically limitlessly reproducible, if it were to take charge of the game, would threaten a constituted authority; that is, an acquired right to expropriation without compensation. This is the source of rape; it just manifests in a patent and practical manner the opinion that is being expressed in the universal prejudice against free women.

Women have no rights because they do not have the right to pleasure—since all rights, at bottom, express an authorization of an enjoyment/pleasure or an interruption of suffering—men, on the other hand, have had the right to take that for themselves, even from nonconsenting subjects. The women who did not want rights, thus, understood that the power-law-desire *nexus* had to be defeated or reorganized, that if enjoyment exists within restrictions, it is not a matter of condemning it or denying it, but of keeping in mind that it creates no real freedom, and that other pleasures are possible too. There is no reactionary sexuality, and no subversive sexuality either, but there is a sexual politics that can have an effect on bodies and languages, which produces certain power games and bans others. The camouflaging of feminism as a politics of parity has shifted the issue from one of pleasure exchange to one of power exchange, which of course biopolitical democracies manage. A world where even women don't know what autonomy their enjoyment has relative to the mechanisms of government, and fear castration, that is, deprivation of a phantom power that in no way

renders them more potent, is but a *vast sprawl of docile bodies*.

“Don’t believe you have rights” [the original title of *Sexual Difference* is *Non Credere Di Avere Dei Diritti*, or ‘don’t believe you have rights.’ -Ed.] means “don’t believe you’re getting any protection in exchange for your obedience,” because after millennia you still offer up your obedience without demanding any compensation, taking a pure loss; don’t believe you’ll be able to blossom in a society created to exclude you: if you’ve been given any rights, it is only because in order to demand them you let yourself be normalized, and now the enemy can integrate you in a way more to your liking.

OUTSIDE? WHERE'S THAT?

“But when women practice emancipation, they realize that it is quite costly, and entails a lot of frustrations and suffering. Because there is no pleasure in producing for this world, and even less in liberation from roles—which re-form themselves as soon as a questioning is primed; it is difficult to sustain the struggle and the exhausting competition that emancipation entails; the acceptance of a rule, of a rhythm, a model, a mode of production and a lifestyle that are totally alienated and foreign, sucks the lifeblood out of us and imposes on us to where it provokes that ever more frequent symptom that, even in popular language, is called ‘schizophrenia.’”

—“Reassuring Foreignness,” in
Mara and the Others

“Progress means then that I get divided in two, my body of the female sex on the one side, and thinking social subject on the other, and between the two, furthermore, is a bond formed of a malaise that can be

obviously felt: rape brought to its perfection as a symbolic act."

—*Sexual Difference*, 1987

Integration always operates by means of a prior operation of criminalization and discrimination; this is where the infinite loop of the law loops closed, where every advance of democracy corresponds to yet another cancerous excrescence of the law in our lives. The apparatus of law functions like a peristaltic expulsion of contradiction out of the body of society; criminalization is the production by power of an intimacy between parties with common interests but divergent ways of pursuing them. By hiding the invisible relatedness that unites the oppressed, the Law has historically set itself up as the sole progenitor of the social as a whole, and the guarantee of its cohesion. But women, exactly like the plebeians, found themselves in a very ambiguous position relative to the Law, since they were neither guaranteed nor represented, but only and exclusively were hindered and threatened by it. Their violent refusal of the Law was thus the requirement for an adulthood beyond the restricted definition of it set by the Enlightenment. As long as we remain in the shadow of the Law, we are still in the condition of a child under guardianship.

As long as the state's monopoly on legitimate violence survives, there will be no legitimacy to practices of freedom that refuse to submit to the self-abasement of an itinerary/career of liberation (*from men, from bosses, from machos, from prejudices, and at bottom from ourselves.*).

Separation cannot be reduced, nor can our potency come out, through an introduction into the social body of self-repression apparatuses like anti-racism, anti-fascism, antimachismo, which are supposed to act on each being. No hope! Each "no," each "better not," adds another little bit to the hodgepodge of prohibitions that comprise each of our lives, which start with mom/dad, are followed by State/society and finish in the arms of Biopower.

Freedom is not necessarily such a beautiful thing to see; it is "the reason for the infanticide mother, the woman who does not want a husband, the homosexual poetess, the egoist daughter... and so on and so forth, encompassing every one of the numerous manners in which female humanity tries to signify its need for a free existence, from the baby that gets

dropped into boiling laundry water to the impulse to steal from supermarkets" (*Sexual Difference*). The refusal to accept and take up the "concentration camp internment of the female destiny" (A. Cavarero) in the foreign terrain of masculine powers and sublimations, that is, of the "civilized," was the gamble of the first feminism that constituted itself separately by practicing "conflict through subtraction." But the strength to undo the mechanisms of subjectivation is not produced within any monosexual heterotopia, and the secession of the feminists remained merely a little hemorrhage of meaning within the greater body of classical politics.

"One day not so far off," writes Teresa de Lauretis, "in one way or another, women will have careers, family names, and property belonging to them alone; children, husbands, and/or lovers according to their preferences, all without altering the existing social relations and the heterosexual structures in which our society and many other societies are so solidly anchored" (T. de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, 1987). That day is not at all far off, indeed it perfectly resembles what is already present for a "privileged" minority.

OIKONOMIA

The difference lies in the fact that whereas the right distinguishes between the mother and the whore, the left declares freedom for all men to use all women. The left involves women in the concept of freedom, something they are looking for above all else, but in reality it only wants them free so it can use them; the right fools women with the concept of the "upstanding woman," which they want to be above all else, and then uses them as wives: they make them into whores that procreate.

—A. Dworkin, *Pornography*,
1981

The whoring nature of biopolitical democracies has done a lot for the equality of the sexes. Those that sold themselves, and thus conceived of themselves as simultaneously the object and the subject of their commerce, were historically the women, for an enormous number of reasons, all of which were of an *economic* nature. Economy, whatever anyone may say, is the law of the home (from the Greek *oikos* and

nomos, house and law), and the house (whether it is a whore house or a private home hardly matters) was the female domain within patriarchal culture. The pleasures of the flesh are domestic, internal affairs which one shouldn't have to share. The up-standing woman/dutiful wife is a private sex object, domesticated, well-behaved, decent. The *cleanliness* of interiors, of the intimate (a synonym for the internal and hidden feminine sex) has long been but a women's affair; making themselves inhabitable (for a penis or for progeny) and available, but quite poorly remunerated relative to the enormity of the task: such is a woman's job, such is her living. And it is not just masculine exploitation that's involved here; it is something located at the intersection between patriarchy and capitalism, in an *economic* domain, because economy is ruled by the law of desires, and everything that is an *object* of desire, even if it is a subject, figures into that fully. In sum we are desirable since we are solvent/creditworthy; we have a charm-capital, a beauty-capital, which we have to know how to manage, and that's now true for men and women both, which fact has to do with the metamorphosis of the production and circulation of bodies more than with a "revolution" in morals. Blending into a fatal and complacent intimacy with *things* has become the mass activity

for fetish-compatible Blooms. That used to be specific just to the “weaker sex.”

Apparently there’s no more intercourse in the lives of men and women since the “sexual liberation” of the seventies, and that’s explained by the following: the economic principle of the circulation of desires—just read any women’s or men’s magazine and you’ll see it confirmed—intends that coitus, the consumption/consummation of the self and the other, is to be *optimized*.

The fearsome contiguity between libidinal economy and mercantile economy is an effect of the transformation of the forms of labor: “What’s at play in work,” explains Bifo, “is the investment of desire, from the moment when social production began incorporating ever larger sections of mental activity, and symbolic, communicative, and emotional activity. What is the most essentially human is what’s involved in the process of cognitive labor: it is not muscular fatigue or the physical transformation of materials anymore; now the product of productive activity is communication, the creation of states of mind, emotion, imagination. Industrial labor of the classical type, above all in the organized form of the fordist factory,

had no relation to pleasure except in compressing it, deferring it, and rendering it impossible. It had no relation to communication, which, on the contrary, was hindered, fragmented, and prevented as long as the workers were on the assembly lines, and even outside of labor time, in their domestic isolation... The industrial worker had no other place for socialization except the subversive community of workers, the political or union organizations where they could organize against capital” (F. “Bifo” Berardi, *The Factory of Unhappiness*, 2001).

Victims of the illusion that anyone could “blossom” in communications work, women put their skills in relationships at the service of Capital, skills they acquired over thousands of years of submission during which time they *had an interest* in making themselves likeable. Advertising, fashion, night clubs, cafes, and even the ground floor of the sad edifice of “immaterial labor” whose bars and sidewalks are crawling with whores, all operate as female added value. Having become inevitably over-conscious of their price, women have become the living currency with which ONE buys men. And so the circle of the prostitution economy closes, leaving nothing outside it, with the exception of a lumpen-proletariat of undesirables, the

handicapped, or the unsellable, the out-of-work men and women of the libidinal factory.

Coitus—and this is all the more true the higher the relational added value of the subjects involved is—thus becomes the space for building reputation-capital, a labor of selfpromotion, one which, even if it fails to hit upon an opportunity, should all the same never fuck up your “game.” That’s how “rebounds” and unsafe (safety-refusing) sexual practices should be interpreted: as little transgressions that allow the *total worker* to go back on the job a little high off it and full of a feeling of having “splurged” in a pretty dangerous way. We put our health-capital in danger like in other times the bourgeoisie would put their marriages in danger by picking up a mistress.

Don Juan was a choir boy compared to today’s hipsters.

ANATOMY OF THE DESIRABLE

*I have but contempt for you, diplomat, manager;
you use the word 'pleasure' when I say 'joy.' You
manage, whereas I feel.*

—H. Hessel, *Helen's Diary*

“The texture of skin also ‘belongs’ to the tongue that loved or hated it, not only to the body supposedly wrapped in it” (Lyotard). That’s why “my body belongs to me” is the most deceitful, lying slogan ever: because there’s no more a central, disembodied “me” than there is private property in bodies. Our enjoyment loses us, puts us in an ecstatic position, where we’re confused with the other/the others. And solitary or autistic pleasure is just another variant of sociality. If we needed a kind of thinking that would go beyond monism or dualism (its manifestation of a split personality) and dialectics (the ruse used to maintain it), it wasn’t because we found the “mixed” hypothesis sexier than separate constitutions, but because desires and

pleasures are relational creations. The less the field of sexuation is burdened with norms, the broader the play among singularities, the more movements of subjectivation and desubjectivations are extended, and the more the potency of the beings involved increases (molecularly but also collectively).

The attitude of liberationist feminism that condemns feminine masochism appears to us to respond much more to a demand for capitalist production than to a need for self-esteem. The woman in power exercises a phallocratic authority, minus the nuts (castration, penis envy); she occupies an unconsciously comical position and she does not get the joke. The sadist—contrary to what capitalism would like to have us believe—does not get off any more or less than the masochist does, just *differently*.

In the framework of a mixed practice of freedom, where the desires of male-female relations detach from the need to accumulate and exploit, the liquidation of specifically feminine masochism remains a hurdle still waiting for both sexes to leap. “Women,” writes Ida Dominijanni, “have been confined by the symbolic patriarchal order to the disorder of rivalry relations measured on the basis of

masculine desire; they've been historically excluded from the social hierarchies, constructed in the image and representation of masculine sexuality; and then they were assigned, within the paradigms of emancipation and liberation, to a 'gender' revolution, based on a miserable idea of the oppressed sex and on fitting in to masculine models. To break out of this double prison of exclusion and homologation, the symbolic structure of desire and exchange need to be reinvented" (I. Dominijanni, *The Desire for Freedom*, 2001).

The abject character of men that defend women against their macho congeners comes from a behavior based on a double self-hate. The hate, first off, of the male in each man (which they give up expressing in an articulate manner to content themselves with reducing it to the silence of shame) and then of the women they deign to protect the weak and infantile part of, a part of them which is secreted precisely by a misogynist culture.

Feminine misogyny, moreover, has ended up seeing the specter of rape in all sexual relations, thus manifesting only the chagrin of women upon seeing themselves made the object of a desire for submission, an ignorant desire for pleasure and its complication, a *monist* or *binary* desire. Whether they like it or not, the bodies of women belong to

the desire of the rapists, as long as they aren't capable of exciting other desires. Getting out of the blame game to start a true dialogue of the flesh is the secret, unavowed hope of ecstatic feminism. This would concern children abusively desired or desirous, the old men excluded from pleasure and perverts of all kinds: sexual "normality" is decided and established at every moment between the beings concerned, since all normative morality has as its only goal the imposition of a more "productive" and controllable behavior than the others.

Commodity society in effect has an emotional and psychosomatic education that is all its own, which can only be fought on the ethical terrain, which can only be defeated by bringing into existence new pleasures arising from new exchanges.

This pornographic and ad-copy education polarizes the various forms-of-life by inscribing the predetermined possibilities into the surface of bodies. Sexuation is the first primary inscription, the one that organizes all the other legibilities, and assigns all bodies to a specific ethos (and to its variants as established by the Spectacle), which makes it so that even if the margin of moral tolerance regarding "gender

disturbances” appears greater now, the summum of the indecipherable remains the body of uncertain gender, with a heretical relational ethos. The integration of transgressions and sexual perversions into the heart of domination’s taxonomy does not have so much to do with an opening of minds arising from the “sexual revolution” as it has to do with a need to colonize territories of desire that are coming out ever more openly. And so if the ethical terrain of homosexuality was in the past a zone falling outside the gaze of the Church, the hand of the State, and the reproduction of the family, it is at present so totally infested and agitated by the Spectacle that its symbolic integration into institutions was obliged to get with the program.

The control of bodies by the progressive colonization and subsumption of their desires has ended up transforming all vestiges of sexual anti-conformism into a new constructible terrain for commodity publicity.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF A WILL TO KNOW

*They're just texts anyway, so let the boys
have them back.*

—D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs
and Women: The Reinvention of
Nature*, 1991

It may be that this text has not come across clearly.

Where does she, they, we want to get to with it? In the uncertain territory that is our everyday life, in this soil which is the least questioned because it is the soil we tread upon, and because if it were to begin eroding, first of all: it would be obvious to everyone, and second of all: we would be in such a state of emergency we wouldn't be writing texts.

And anyway, what kind of a text talks about what everyone sees and does not specifically name an external enemy, does not name

programmatic issues, does not *explain* anything new to us, properly speaking?

It is a tool. Or more precisely, it is a weapon of war. It is a tool when we use it on ourselves, to demonstrate the mechanisms of the technologies of gender that comprise us, and it is a weapon when we turn it against those who prevent us from taking hold of those mechanisms, all the conscious or unconscious reproducers of reproductive censorship. It is the rifle of the mixed partisan war that the Imaginary Party needs. We learn from the scientists how to clone the “living,” and every day we unlearn cooperation, the only resort of freedom.

For the time being, we are very tired. It is time to go on a good long strike. A human strike, which will be so radically destructive that it will in the same movement destroy the enemy that’s inside of us. And only then will we realize how much space it took up and how much indulgence it required of us, how useful it was too, and how much it collaborated and participated in our coherence (the coherence of death among the children of dialectics).

The human strike does not demand—in a sense it is even its opposite—a sexual revolution; it demands *psychosomatic revolution*. In the epistemological question there is an emotional one, one that

decides on our relationship to the world; the political question there is an existential one, one that puts our being-in-the-world into play. The human strike attacks the commodity economy at what holds it together: by undermining its two bases, psychic economy and libidinal economy.

Is it dangerous?

Yes, and it is beautiful.

Furthermore whatever is not dangerous is also undignified.

Women have been made likeable for their fragility; they've been consecrated to love by being made incapable of living, by their existence being transformed into a series of threats that oblige them to take refuge in the necessary arms of a man. What we need now is a kind of danger with no possible refuge; we need passions that can make do without compassion.

The hero was pitiful in his ignorance. We take away from him his monopoly on the struggle, and give up complaining about him and forgiving him. The thousands of years of culture that have driven into men the conviction that they shouldn't be afraid of dying have ended up producing in them a *fear of living*. The struggle against this fear is the beginning of a partisan war where every form-of-life

is also a form of struggle, and which appears in little snippets in the acts that stand behind these lines.

What's important at bottom is not what we retain from the strange and contradictory history of ecstatic feminism, but what it demolishes: the little inner collapses that follow the shake-up of familiarities.

Does that lead to nothing? No!

It does lead to something! It does!

It makes room. To live. To laugh. To struggle.

“Destruction keeps you young,” wrote Benjamin, and he was right.

“Men have kind hearts when they are not afraid but they are afraid afraid afraid. I say they are afraid, but if I were to tell them so their kindness would turn to hate. Yes the Quakers are right, they are not afraid because they do not fight, they do not fight.”

“But Susan B. you fight and you are not afraid.”

“I fight and I am not afraid, I fight but I am not afraid.”

“And you will win.”

“Win what, win what.”

—G. Stein, *The Mother of Us All*, 1947

for F.C.

LES PÉTROLEUSES WERE THE SEX WORKERS, WITCHES,
AND LADY-PROLES OF THE PARIS COMMUNE WHOSE
'LOVE OF RIOT' BURNT PARIS TO THE GROUND.

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IT IS A TOOL.
OR MORE PRECISELY,
IT IS A WEAPON OF WAR.